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ASSURING AND ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF ONLINE COURSES: EXPLORING INTERNAL MECHANISMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ENGLAND

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Abstract

The expansion and diversification of the higher education system in England in the last 30 years has led to traditional campus-based institutions starting to offer more flexible patterns of delivery amongst which the development of online learning courses has become widespread practice. One aspect that has been particularly affected by these new modes of delivery has been that of institutional processes set up to maintain and enhance the quality of programmes, brought about by the government calling for institutions to be more accountable. Internal mechanisms for quality assurance and enhancement are part of the requirements that higher education institutions have in place as part of their responsibility for the quality of their programmes. The question posed here was whether these internal quality assurance mechanisms are effective for every type of course provided by an institution, and particularly whether they are effective to assure and enhance the quality of online learning courses.

This research aimed to further understand how effective the quality assurance procedures used by dual-mode universities are in ensuring and enhancing the quality of their online courses. The research strategy aimed to identify whether the quality assurance procedures implemented were capturing the aspects that characterise online courses. To allow an examination of the procedures, as well as the features of the courses under study, a case study approach was selected as the most appropriate strategy for this enquiry. The results indicate the features of online courses impacting on the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures were: the position that these courses had within their institutions; the distributed configuration of teams; and the distant location of students. These were limiting the potential of the mechanisms to assure and enhance quality. In terms of the specific quality assurance procedures studied, the findings suggest that the mechanisms most affected by the online modality were module evaluations, student representatives and team meetings.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Over the last 30 years key changes have taken place in higher education institutions, particularly in the English system, that have led to significant transformations in its practices and policies. In his historical review, Ashwin (2006) compares the higher education system of 1973 to the one observed in 2003, identifying six interrelated areas in which higher education presents major changes:

- the unification of the higher education system – the binary divide came to an end in 1992 and the polytechnics became 'universities', expanding the system significantly;
- an expansion in the number of students accessing university, which is estimated to have increased four-fold between 1973 and 2003;
- increasing diversification of the student body, particularly regarding gender, race and age;
- the move towards the modularisation of study programmes;
- a drastic fall in funding (as a proportion of UK's gross domestic product) provided by the government; and
- a shift in the government's aims for higher education, now focused on its vocational nature.

Two main processes were triggered by these changes. On the one hand, at the institutional level, this expansion and diversification of the system led universities to set up new types of courses and to implement new teaching methods to satisfy the needs of the student body (Brennan and Shah, 2000; Dunkerley and Wong, 2001). On the other hand, driven by their concern and to prevent universities lowering their quality, governments called for more accountable institutions through the implementation of a set of quality assurance measures (Harvey and Knight, 1996).

These changes drove higher education institutions to provide better and innovative programmes of study. Innovation and good quality became two main issues which have characterised the higher education system for the last two decades.

ICT in Higher Education

The expansion and diversification of higher education systems brought a more diverse student body into universities. New entrants were from a wider range of backgrounds, ages and qualifications, and also from traditionally disadvantaged groups (ethnic minorities and disabilities). According to the figures presented by Ashwin (2006) the proportion of students between 18 and 20 years old participating in higher education grew from 14% in 1973 to 35% in 2003, transforming it into a 'mass' system. He also reports a continuing rise of mature students, as the proportion of students over 21 years old increased from 21% in 1973 to 60% in 2003.

This growing demand for higher education placed institutions in a new competitive situation, in which they needed to respond creatively to the needs of the new student body, within the constraints of limited funding, in order to succeed. In this way, flexible learning became one of the significant means by which institutions could address change (Kirkpatrick, 2001). Higher education institutions consequently started offering more flexible courses, with regard to methods of delivery, venues, modularity, timetables and periods of time needed to obtain qualifications (Johnston, 1999; Kirkpatrick, 2001).

According to Tait and Mills (1999) this move towards more flexible modes of delivery was accelerated by the use of information and communication technologies (ICT); the potential offered by the new technologies seems to have stimulated the move towards flexibility as they provided the way to make teaching and learning provision less time and place dependent (Johnston, 1999; Tait and Mills, 1999). Furthermore, within higher education, the notion of flexibility started to be associated with the use of ICT, as revealed by the number of initiatives and projects focused on the use of technology (Kirkpatrick and Jakupec, 1999).

In England in 1992, a major programme was initiated by the government to support twenty eight projects aimed to establish new distance learning courses to widen access and re-examine the process of teaching and learning (Wade, 1994). The same year, the Universities Funding Council (UFC) funded forty-three projects under the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme (TLTP) expressly oriented to make teaching and learning within institutions more productive and efficient with the use of technology. From these projects, a variety of applications of technology in teaching and learning were implemented, which

mainly included courseware production and staff training and development. A year later, a second phase was launched with the same aims, funding thirty-three new projects. A third phase was finally announced in 1998 with the specific goal to support institutions in integrating the materials developed in the previous stages (HEFCE, 2001).

In the evaluation of this initiative it is recognised however that not only did the projects themselves impact on the uptake of technology by the higher education system as a whole, but also the outcomes of two other concurrent events: the Dearing Report of 1997 which recommended that all higher education institutions should establish strategies to develop ICT; and the technological developments observed during the 90's with the creation of the Internet, the World Wide Web, and the additional capacity and power of increasingly affordable computers (Haywood et al., 1999).

Later on, in 1999 a new programme – the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund – was launched. This new initiative, which invested £181 million over a seven year-period, positioned the use of information and communication technologies as a means of innovation in teaching and learning (White, 2000).

Two further policy documents that have strongly influenced this process in England were published in 2005. These were the Higher Education Funding Council for England's E-learning Strategy (HEFCE, 2005a), and the Department for Education and Skills' e-Strategy (DfES, 2005) which built on and complemented the former in relation to higher education. The main goal of these strategies was to support institutions to 'embed' the use of ICT in learning, by setting out an implementation process through seven strands covering the broader aspects of teaching and learning. The effects of these strategies are not yet visible as its first evaluation is planned for 2007.

The fast development of new technologies, matched with the continuing support from the funding councils to develop the use of ICT in teaching and learning, encouraged universities to start offering online courses (Wallace, 2003). Traditional distance learning providers were the first to start using communication technologies – e-mail and computer conferencing – as early as the mid 80's (Harasim, 2000). In England, the Open University launched its first course that included an online component in 1989 as a way to improve the communications between tutors and students and among students themselves (Mason, 2000). During the 90's campus-based universities also started to provide online learning to support and improve their face to face courses and to increase productivity and flexibility (Farrell, 1999). This process has been described by Tait and Mills (1999) as the

convergence of 'conventional education' with 'distance learning', where conventional or campus-based higher education institutions started to become 'dual-mode' (Tait, 1999) offering face to face and also technology-based distance learning courses.

This mode of technology-based distance education has grown steadily over the past decade, becoming widely used by universities around the world. In the US it has been estimated that in 2000-2001 90% of universities offering distance education courses were using the Internet for their provision (Tabs, 2003). Other countries, like Australia and Canada, also have an extensive experience in providing online education or e-learning. In the UK, it has been estimated that in 1999 there were more than 70 dual-mode higher education institutions (Weyers, 2000).

The literature is very extensive in reporting examples of the use of information and communication technologies for the provision of online learning in higher education (for example, McConnell, 1994; Wegner and Holloway, 1999; Schrum, 2000; Mitchell, Dipetta and Kerr, 2001; Murphy, Zhang and Perris, 2003; Oliver and Herrington, 2003). In these accounts, there is usually wide agreement on the benefits that the use of technology can bring to teaching and learning. In addition to its potential for widening access, it is considered to have greater capacity for delivering materials, being easily updated, and supporting more student-centred and constructivist approaches to learning. There is, however, wide debate around the difficulties that the attainment of these benefits entails, and the costs and disadvantages involved in its implementation. Among the difficulties most frequently mentioned are: the considerable additional time from staff that student support demands; the need for effective strategies to facilitate and encourage discussion among students, and the need to select appropriate learning tasks.

Despite these difficulties, it seems to be clear that the use of technology has become part of higher education teaching and learning. Although these issues – benefits and limitations of the use of technology in teaching and learning – still continue to be discussed, it is possible to identify a move from being the practice of some individual innovators towards becoming a major element in higher education institutions' teaching and learning policies (HEFCE, 2005b).

Online, distance and flexible learning – a note on terminology

The most recent development in the use of the term e-learning was prompted by the

English government's e-learning strategies (DfES, 2005; HEFCE, 2005a) which have presented a definition of e-learning as 'any learning that uses ICT'. In this use of the term, e-learning not only includes the use of technology for distance learning and for more flexible patterns of delivery, but also its use within a classroom setting (e.g. a PowerPoint slide presentation). This use of the term e-learning is broader than the scope of this research project. It is important to clarify that here, the term 'e-learning' will be used only to represent the use of technology for distance and flexible learning.

Within the range of literature in the area of online learning it is difficult to find definitions for 'online learning' or 'e-learning'. Most texts clarify the terms that they will be using as synonymous. Expressions like 'web-based learning', 'internet-based learning', 'interactive distance learning', 'virtual education', 'e-learning', 'e-education', 'e-university' and 'flexible learning' are used interchangeably with online learning on many occasions (Mayes, 2001; Frydenberg, 2002; Roffe, 2002; Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003; OBHE, 2003). The long list of terms in use might denote the popularity of this area (White, 2000), but also this terminology is used to make reference to any kind of use of ICT in education, regardless of the type of use, the technology used or the role that technology has (Farrell, 2001).

Accounts of the origin of the term 'online learning' invariably start with the definition of the concept of 'distance learning' as the first model of education aimed to improve access to education at the end of the nineteenth century. What defines distance education is the physical separation between teacher and learner, where the teaching and learning process was basically print-based. Subsequently, with the development of technology, new terms have come into widespread usage. According to Farrell (2001) with the incorporation of television, radio and videoconferencing, terms like 'open learning', 'telelearning' and 'distributed learning' appeared. Later, with the incorporation of asynchronous interactivity, terms such as 'online learning' and 'e-learning' frequently started to be employed, in place of the former terms.

Taking into account these distinctions, Farrell (2001) presents definitions for four of the main terms commonly used: 'flexible learning', 'distance education', 'open learning', and 'virtual education'. He defines 'flexible learning' as the learning experience that can be accessed at any time and any place, mostly related to the way in which activities are arranged rather than to the use of particular forms of technology. The concept of 'distance education' – defined basically in opposition to 'campus-based education' – is characterised by the separation between learner and teacher and where the link between them could be

supplied by any kind of technology. 'Open learning' is defined as the policy with which an educational system operates, like open entry, transfer of credits, recognition of prior learning, etc. Finally, he defines 'virtual education', 'online learning' and 'e-learning' as terms that 'emerged to describe the use of ICT to improve distance education, implement open learning policies, make learning activities more flexible and enable these activities to be distributed among many learning venues' (Farrell, 2001:142). Interestingly, he indicates that the term 'online learning' implies a stronger use of computers and the web, and that 'e-learning' tends to be used more in corporate contexts. This latter claim however is not relevant nowadays, at least in the English context, as the term 'e-learning' has become widely used in educational settings as a result of the latest government's policy documents (see DfES, 2005; HEFCE, 2005a).

A simpler definition is offered by Roffe (2002) who states that 'e-learning', 'e-education' and 'online education' are terms referring to the way people communicate and learn electronically and argues their differences are mostly related to the type of technology used. Middlehurst and Campbell (2003) on the other hand, approach the definition of these terms differently. They suggest that the use of information and communication technologies is blurring the borders between distance and campus-based education, and is reflected in the term 'blended learning' which was originally used in corporate education. 'Virtual learning' and 'e-learning' then reflect the interaction of the three main variables involved: time, place and technology (Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003). An interesting variation to these definitions is presented by Frydenberg (2002) who points out that 'e-learning' is usually offered in a modality that comes from the American tradition of independent learning, where students do not follow the standard university terms and are not part of a cohort group.

The distinctions presented by the different authors are not entirely coherent although they offer some useful information to understand the origin of the terminology currently in use. It seems possible however to distinguish three main groups of terms according to the three variables alluded to: distance between learner and teacher (distance education); flexibility in the provision, understood as the degree of adaptation to student's characteristics and needs (open learning, flexible learning); and the use of information and communication technologies, especially Internet-based technologies (online learning, e-learning). The difficulty in making this demarcation in the use of these terms is that the three variables are usually closely interrelated in practice. An online course may be, and usually is, a distance

learning course; and by its nature, it provides more flexibility to the learners. For this reason, and for the purpose of this research project, the terms 'online learning' and 'e-learning' will be used interchangeably, both meaning the provision of distance education where the main means of delivery (although this may not be the only one) is the Internet or any of its services and tools, such as the World Wide Web, conferencing systems, virtual learning environments, electronic mail, and discussion groups, among others. Also the term 'blended learning' and 'mixed-mode' will be used to identify those courses that have a face to face component combined with online activities.

The research problem

Concurrent with the developments in the use of technology observed in higher education institutions, major transformations in quality assurance have taken place over the past decades at different levels: institutional, national and international. This led to the generation of intense debates over the notions of quality embedded in the different arrangements, and the role and effectiveness of these mechanisms in improving the quality of courses.

As the analysis in the literature review will show in Chapter 2, the multiple definitions of quality in higher education have led to different strategies to monitor and evaluate quality, amongst which is quality assurance. At institutional level, quality assurance mechanisms are strongly affected by the notions of accountability and enhancement, which are particularly relevant in the English context, where the roles of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and higher education institutions' internal quality management systems have evolved during the last decade in the search for more appropriate and effective mechanisms.

A close exploration of the internal quality assurance mechanisms in higher education institutions in England will show that the tension between accountability and enhancement is not easily resolved, putting greater strain on the capacity of institutions to manage their internal procedures effectively (Middlehurst, 1997; Biggs, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Inglis, 2005). This challenge has become more demanding as new modes of provision are increasingly part of traditional campus-based higher education institutions, and institutions are trying to use the same mechanisms to deal with a completely new form of course.

Internal mechanisms for quality assurance and quality enhancement are part of the requirements that English higher education institutions have in place as part of their

responsibility for the quality of their programmes (QAA, 2002b). The QAA recommends that higher education institutions use these mechanisms to assist them in the processes of assuring and enhancing the quality of all their courses. The question that emerges therefore is whether these internal quality assurance mechanisms are effective for assuring and enhancing the quality of online learning courses.

The research questions

This research has been carried out with the purpose of understanding how dual-mode higher education institutions approach the application of their internal quality assurance procedures to their online courses in order to allow them to assure and enhance their quality. The main research question of this study is:

- Are quality assurance procedures used by dual-mode universities to ensure and enhance the quality of their online and mixed-mode courses effective?

The research strategy adopted seeks to identify whether the quality assurance procedures already in place in the institutions under study were able to capture – and to what extent – the aspects that characterise online courses. Based on the assumption that quality assurance procedures are not able to capture all online courses' aspects, three specific research questions are to be explored:

- Which features of the online modality influence the capacity of the quality assurance procedures to capture the quality aspects of courses?
- What do team members do to assure and enhance the quality of the online course?
- What are the components in an online course that cannot be regarded as equivalent to the ones present in a face-to-face course?

To carry out this analysis, a case study approach was selected as the most appropriate strategy that would allow a deep examination of the quality assurance procedures as well as the features of the courses under study, maintaining the connection with their institutional context.

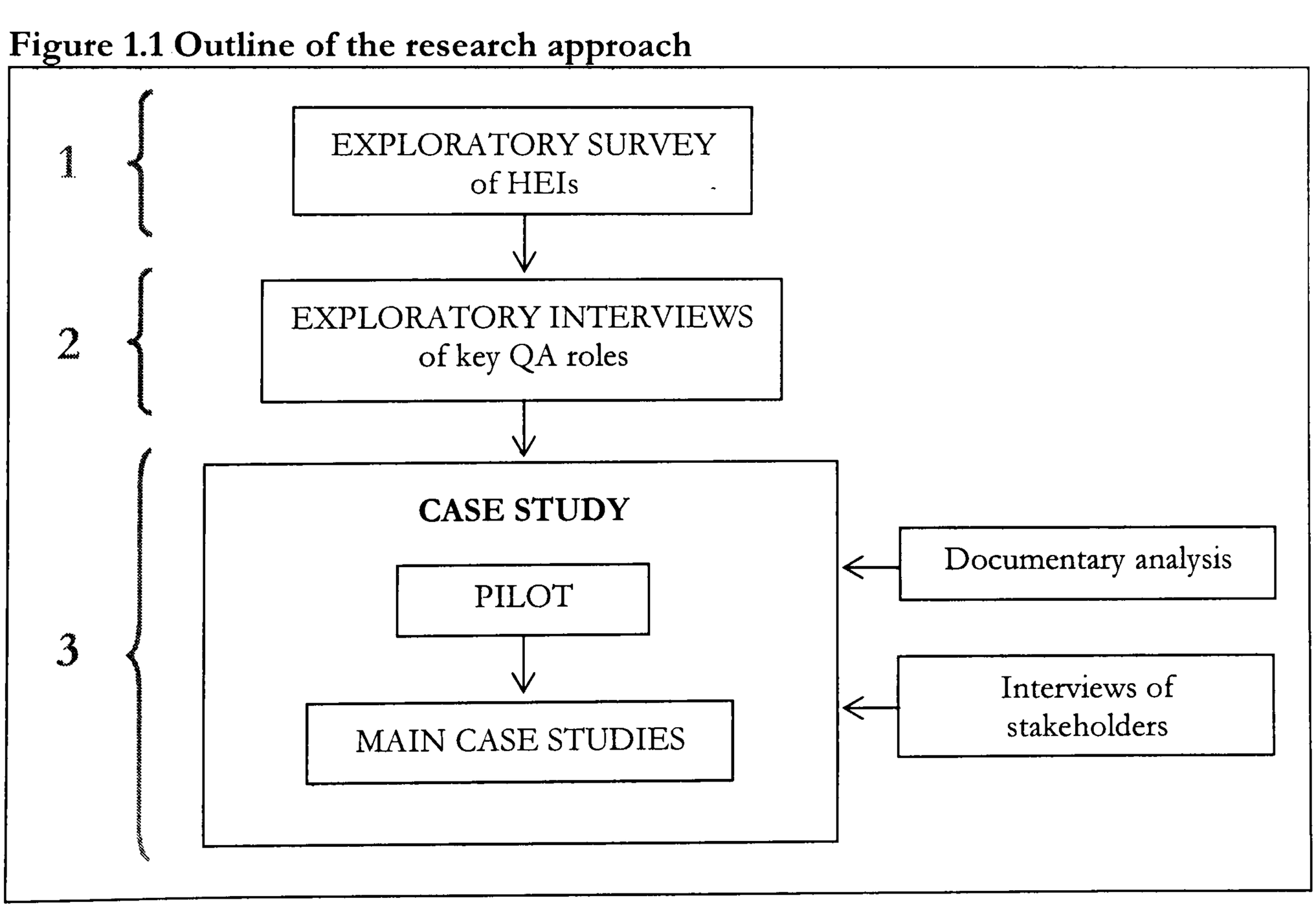
Outline of the research approach

The research approach adopted in this project included three stages. The first two stages consisted of two exploratory studies. The first exploratory study carried out early in the project was a survey of dual-mode higher education institutions, which provided a closer picture of how institutions in England were approaching the quality assurance of their online and mixed-mode courses. The second exploratory study - focused on understanding how quality assurance mechanisms operate and how staff experience them - consisted of a set of interviews with key quality assurance roles in higher education institutions. The results of both studies helped to define the research problem and refine the research questions which were presented above.

Based on the refined research questions, the third stage – the case studies – were defined and carried out. The case study methodology included two data collection processes: documentary analysis and interviews of stakeholders. The case study approach was initially piloted to test the data collection methods and trial the data-analysis process.

The overview of these stages is presented in Figure 1.1 below.

Figure 1.1 Outline of the research approach



Overview of the thesis

This thesis consists of eight chapters, starting with this Introduction in which the main challenges affecting higher education institutions over the last three decades are presented.

In Chapter Two a selective literature review of quality notions and quality assurance in higher education is presented and discussed. From this overall review, Chapter Three focuses on the main issues in the field, delimiting the research area for this project through two preliminary exploratory studies that led to the refinement and definition of the research problem and research questions of this enquiry.

Chapter Four presents the methodology and methods chosen for the selection of the case studies, the collection of data, and the analysis of the results. This methodology was tested in a pilot study which provided useful insights regarding the methodology, as well as suggesting some complementary methods to improve the collection of data. The pilot study is presented in Chapter Five. Chapter Six presents the four case studies that constitute the main study and their results.

In Chapter Seven the results obtained are discussed in relation to the literature reviewed and the institutional situation in which the online courses were located. Finally a summary of findings and conclusions are presented in Chapter Eight.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided an overview of the circumstances and main drivers affecting higher education universities over the last 30 years by providing the necessary context within which this research project has been carried out.

This thesis examines how dual-mode higher education institutions in England approach the application of their internal quality assurance procedures to their online courses in such a way that would allow them to assure and enhance their quality. The research strategy aimed to identify whether the quality assurance procedures implemented were capturing the aspects that characterise online courses. A case study approach allowed an examination of the quality assurance procedures as well as the features of the courses under study.

The next chapter will present the literature review of the quality issues and quality assurance arrangements in place in England in the last decade, placing special attention on

the challenges that have emerged from the application of the quality assurance mechanisms in online courses in dual-mode higher education institutions. This review provides the background for this research project and forms the basis for the definition of the research questions.

Chapter Two

Quality Assurance in Higher Education

During the last two decades higher education institutions have experienced significant transformations that have changed their practices and policies. The application of communication and information technologies to teaching and learning has been one important transformation within higher education institutions as a way to tackle the increasing number and diversity of the student population. Nowadays the use of ICT is fast becoming a widespread practice in higher education, in particular its use as a means for distance and online learning provision. It can be suggested that technology-based provision has a strong position in higher education institutions.

As a consequence of the integration of online learning, several challenges for higher education institutions have been raised, especially for traditional campus-based providers. One aspect significantly affected by these new modes of course delivery is quality assurance policy.

In this chapter a focused literature review of quality assurance in higher education will be presented and discussed in terms of two main issues: the notions of quality that lie behind the different quality assurance arrangements that have been put in place in England in the last few years, and the ways in which dual mode higher education institutions are dealing with the quality assurance of their online courses.

The quality issue

One theme that has characterised the discussion of higher education systems for the last two decades is the issue of quality. In her review of the genesis of the quality movement in higher education, Morley (2003) points out that there is little evidence to demonstrate that the development of quality systems was in response to serious quality problems in the sector. She suggests that the origin of the quality issue was prompted in the late 1980s by political concerns to maintain standards of mass provision. Brown (2004), in his analysis of the 1991 White Paper that marks the start of the quality arrangements, states this new regime was not concerned with improving quality. In his view, the new arrangements were

concerned mainly with two issues: on the one hand, to ensure that quality was maintained as the expansion of the system continued and the competition intensified, and hence the universities had to be more efficient in the use of their resources; and on the other hand, quality assurance arrangements would provide a way for the new funding councils to judge value for money (Brown, 2004). Other accounts indicate that higher education institutions have always taken care of the quality of their provision, but the government introduced special measures during the 1980's as a way to make universities accountable for the funding they received (Brennan, Vries and Williams, 1997; Brennan and Shah, 2000; Morley, 2003).

Accountability appears in this way to be the main drive of the quality assurance arrangements that started to be implemented across the English higher education system in the early 90's. Since then, quality assurance regulations in higher education are characterised by constant change (Morley, 2003; Brown, 2004; Harvey, 2005), with successive attempts to keep quality assurance activities consistent with the evolving discussion. These changes are considered by some authors as representing continuous improvement (Morley, 2003), while others regard them only as an indication of the conflicting views of what quality assurance should be (Brown, 2004).

More importantly, the changes show the complex nature of the debate around quality. However, among the multiple aspects in relation to which quality assurance in higher education is discussed (Loder, 1990; Morley, 2003; Hoecht, 2006), one issue arises that has particular relevance: the concept of quality behind the arrangements.

Notions of quality

Defining what quality is clearly is a problematic and complex endeavour. The notion of quality has been permanently under debate and involves ambiguity (Barnett, 1994a; Warn and Tranter, 2001; Hill, Lomas and MacGregor, 2003). It is however necessary to explore its multiple and evolving definitions in order to understand the quality assurance systems currently in use.

Although almost every paper in the area presents their own – new or not – definition of quality, it is possible to recognise in them the categories of quality formalised by Harvey and Green (1993). In their work, Harvey and Green distinguished five notions of quality: as exceptional; as perfection (or consistency); as fitness for purpose; as value for money and

as transformation. These categories show the wide range of views of what quality is or could be in the context of higher education.

Quality as 'exceptional' is based on the traditional notion of quality. This long-established notion understands quality as something special and exclusive, not achievable by many people. Applied to the educational context, quality as exceptional focuses on the (high) levels of input and outputs. Quality as 'perfection' is the notion that something of quality is something with zero defects – that is carried out perfectly the very first time. 'Fitness for purpose' is the third notion of quality presented, where the criteria to assess quality are related to the purpose of the product or service. One problem that arises with this notion in the context of education is that the resulting quality of the product or service will depend on whose purpose is considered (customer or provider). Quality as 'value for money' is based on the concept of market where quality is linked to accountability. In this notion, quality is measured using performance indicators and improved by competition. Finally, quality as 'transformation' is based on the idea of qualitative change of form. Applied to education, quality education is the one that produces changes in the participants, and enhances and empowers them. In this notion, quality is to be measured by the value added during the process of education (Harvey and Green, 1993; Harvey and Knight, 1996).

A different approach to identify different notions of quality is presented by Barnett (1992). He argues that different approaches to quality depend on the conception of what higher education is; and this conception will consequently lead to different methods to assess quality (Barnett, 1994a). He identifies four main and dominant conceptions of the purpose of higher education, each of them with an associated conception of quality and with a distinctive set of performance indicators (PIs). The first of these four conceptions is higher education as the production of highly qualified manpower, which considers higher education as the way to 'produce' workers; following this conception, a high quality institution is the one which has the ability to produce workers who succeed in the world of work. The second conception is higher education as training for a research career, which is mainly related with staff rather than students' accomplishments. For this conception, quality indicators are built based firstly on the research activities of academics, and secondly on the entry qualifications of students. The third conception is higher education as the efficient management of teaching provision, which is a notion based on the massification and diversification of higher education, where quality is understood as the ability of an institution to provide teaching effectively. And finally, the fourth notion is higher education

as a matter of extending life changes, in which universities are seen as a means for social mobility. In this conception, quality indicators are the level of diversity of students regarding qualification, class, age, ethnicity or disability.

The main criticism that Barnett poses to these conceptions is that all of them perceive higher education as a closed system where 'students enter as inputs, are processed, and emerge as outputs', and what happens during the process is a 'black box' (Barnett, 1994a). It is implied here that these views are not interested in the quality of the educational process or in the characteristics of the learning attained by the students, which cannot be assessed by quantitative performance indicators (PIs). Based on the examination of PIs as an unsuccessful means for evaluating the quality of an educational process, Barnett (1994a) proposes an educational review process, a 'forum' of critical dialogue to evaluate the quality of higher education institutions or programmes, where all legitimate parties (voices of the different stakeholders) could be heard. He indicates that these parties should include, at least, the members of the team who are conducting the activities, the students and outsiders (such as peers inside the institution, or other universities, or from the wider society). Barnett (1994a) argues that this process of performance review permits illuminating the nature of the educational process, and would have more impact if intended for quality enhancement rather than to make judgements of what has happened in the past.

Taking a more practical approach and in the attempt to overcome the problem of these different views of quality, Yorke (1999) uses a definition provided by ISO 8042, where quality is defined as 'the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs' (Yorke, 1999:17). In this definition, quality is in the student or in the ability of the institution to anticipate what the student needs. Similarly, Pond (2002) defines quality education simply as one where a student's expectations for his/her learning are met or exceeded. Although the latter is to some extent simplistic, both descriptions put the student view at the centre of the definition, which contrasts with the perspectives of Harvey and Green (1993) and Barnett (1994a), which are focused on the provider's point of view.

Whilst these definitions of quality seem not to have a resolution, they impact directly on the type of method used to measure quality. Where the quality of higher education is measured by its inputs and outputs, or the nature and quality of the student experience is the main focus of the evaluation process, the results could be very different. According to Tam (2001) one direct result of the diversity of views about quality is the variety of systems

and approaches developed for monitoring and evaluating quality in higher education.

Among these systems is quality assurance, which is defined as the system by which an institution not only looks to detect faults, but also to prevent them, through the implementation of appropriate procedures to monitor its internal activities. Quality assurance in this way is defined basically by opposition to quality control that mainly focuses on the measurement of the quality of final products and services to see if they have reached predefined standards (Tam, 2001). Quality assurance however is a contested concept that is used with different meanings in different contexts. A more detailed account of its different definitions at different levels of application is presented in the next section.

Quality Assurance

In their comprehensive report *Quality Assurance and Borderless Higher Education*, Middlehurst & Campbell (2003) state the need to agree on a common understanding of the concept since the use of the term quality assurance has different meanings in different countries, or is used to name other concepts like accreditation or recognition, which are not strictly the same.

At a general level, quality assurance is defined as 'all the arrangements made at any of several levels (national, international, supranational, regional) to assure the reliability and quality of institutions, consortia, other providers, programmes, qualifications and other educational services' (Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003:11). This definition is broad and open, taking into account all the actions carried out by national and international agencies to assure the quality of institutions or programmes. This particular concept of quality assurance may include different aspects and components, and there is the need to understand each one in the context of the regulatory framework of the country to which it pertains (Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003).

At a narrower level, Middlehurst & Campbell (2003) indicate that quality assurance refers 'to the monitoring and review of institutional activity from an internal or external perspective (or both) and refers to similar arrangements at the level of disciplines, programmes and awards' (Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003:11). This understanding of the term is confined by national boundaries, the arrangement being that a national agency and the higher education institutions have to assure the quality of the programmes and qualifications on offer.

Quality assurance can be carried out through three main mechanisms: accreditation, assessment and process review (Massy, 1996; Woodhouse, 1999). Accreditation is when an institution or programme is externally evaluated to define whether it meets threshold quality criteria. Usually accreditation adopts a combination of performance indicators, self-assessment and peer review, always referenced to a set of predefined standards determined by the accrediting agency. The result of an accreditation process comes in the form of certification. Middlehurst and Campbell (2003) characterise accreditation as a term to describe a type of external review process of institutional activity. Accreditation is also defined by Brennan & Shah (2000) as 'an achieved status awarded to an institution or programme by an authorised body, generally based on the results of an assessment or evaluation process'.

The second quality assurance mechanism is assessment, which evaluates the quality of specific educational activities (programme or subject) to grade them on its academic quality. This method goes beyond the accreditation binary decision (pass or fail) to make graded judgements about the level of academic quality that falls above threshold standards, which usually are internally defined by the institution. Assessment can be carried out by an external agency or by the institutions themselves, and it typically uses a combination of performance indicators, self-study and peer review.

The third method, quality process review (also called 'quality audit') is described as an externally driven analysis of the institutional internal quality assurance, assessment and improvement systems. It does not evaluate quality but the processes that produce quality (Massy, 1996).

From a different perspective, Inglis (2005) defines quality assurance as one of three functions or quality processes within higher education, along with benchmarking and quality improvement. According to his analysis, quality is about making comparative judgements and the differences between these three processes revolve around the type of comparison they make. In this context, quality assurance is the process by which a product or service is compared with a predetermined (minimum) standard, defined either internally or externally. In contrast, the other two processes make a different type of comparison. Benchmarking is about comparing the quality of a product or service with similar products or services offered by other providers; and quality improvement is about an internal comparison between the current standard and the standard being targeted (Inglis, 2005). In this framework two issues are highlighted regarding the role that standards have in the

implementation of any quality process: who is defining those standards and who is making the comparison.

There were some puzzling aspects in the literature reviewed concerning the variety of definitions of quality assurance that can be collected; and most of the differences seemed to be related to the level on which the analysis is carried out. Most authors refer to quality assurance at national or international level, specifically to the arrangements that agencies or governments have put in place mainly for accountability purposes. Only a few research papers were found that focused on the quality assurance procedures at intra-institutional or programme level. These covered the internal mechanisms that an institution would implement in order to monitor their own standards (which could be audited externally by agencies) and also to enhance quality.

There is a lively debate around this tension between assurance and enhancement in the literature found. According to Middlehurst (1997) quality assurance and quality enhancement are not the same as the first is concerned with determining that objectives and aims have been achieved, while quality enhancement is concerned with making improvements. In her view, and from an internal quality management stand point, quality enhancement is part of a wider framework in which quality control, quality assurance, quality enhancement and transformation are stages in the management of quality. She argues however that the common belief that quality assurance leads naturally to quality enhancement is not correct, as most quality assurance efforts are by and large concentrated in accountability; and accountability and enhancement are not necessarily connected and some times are even in conflict with each other (Middlehurst, 1997). An interesting addition to this discussion is presented by Biggs (2001) who argues that quality assurance may be either 'retrospective' or 'prospective' depending on the type of quality it is aiming to assure. In his view, retrospective quality assurance looks into the past to make a judgement with a focus on accountability. In contrast, prospective quality assurance is concerned with the present and future, focusing on quality as fit for purpose, and encouraging improvement. In this sense, he goes on to describe three aspects of quality within an institution, amongst which is quality enhancement, defined as the internal mechanisms that an institution puts in place to continually review and improve practice.

From these accounts it seems clear that the concept of 'quality assurance' would include an enhancement function where its role is to identify the quality – understood as fit for purpose – of products or services. Consequently, as external quality assurance

arrangements usually have an accountability function, their enhancement role is challenged. According to an OECD report (Woodhouse, 1999) the tension between improvement and accountability is often not resolved, especially in those cases where the external reviews of quality are linked to funding.

Quality assurance internationally

Different approaches towards quality assurance systems were found to be currently in use in different countries. In the United States (US), quality assurance is based on an accreditation system. Universities voluntarily undertake an external evaluation process carried out by a regional institution that focuses on three levels: the institution, the programme and the course. The quality of a university is assured, in this way, by the reliability and prestige of the body that gives the accreditation (Brennan and Shah, 2000; Hope, 2001; Twigg, 2001). The main difference between the quality assurance systems of England and the US is the point of reference to which the assessment refers. In the case of England, the evaluation is made in relation to the institution's own standards and aims (Yorke, 1999). In the North American accreditation system, standards are defined by the accrediting body. Australia on the other hand, established the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in 2000, which conducts quality audits to assess the adequacy of the institutions' quality assurance arrangements and their success in maintaining standards (AUQA, 2006). It shares many features with the system implemented in England.

The problem that arises with the range of systems in place around the world – which is acquiring increasing relevance due to greater competition – is the equivalence between institutions. There are several efforts that could allow comparability being carried out by different international quality assurance agencies to develop common arrangements and standards (Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003). As a consequence of the expansion of collaborative provision and the delivery of courses across boundaries, two major issues have emerged for higher education institutions engaged in these activities: the audit of partner institutions abroad, and the potential double audit processes, both requiring urgent resolution. To overcome these issues, major initiatives have been undertaken by international organisations such as the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE) and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), aiming to provide mechanisms for independent certification and mutual recognition of external quality assurance agencies (Woodhouse, 1999).

At European level, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was established in 2004 to promote collaboration in quality assurance. This organisation has also been leading the implementation of the quality assurance aspects of the Bologna Declaration. The Bologna Declaration (1999) aims to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010 with a common credit system to encourage mobility of students and teachers; it also seeks to establish a common framework for quality assurance. The latest development in this area was the adoption in May 2005 of the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area' by the European Ministers of Education (ENQA, 2006).

Quality assurance in England

In its origins, the implementation of quality assurance arrangements in higher education in England was founded on the notion of quality as value for money, expressed by the call to universities to be accountable for the money they received. Institutions had to be efficient and effective. This notion however was not the only one present in the request to higher education institutions; quality defined as being fit for purpose was also present in the government's White Paper (DES, 1991), as it also recognised that quality assessment should be done against the distinctive mission defined by each institution (Harvey and Green, 1993). These conflicting perspectives are considered to be the origin of the multiple changes that were brought about in the quality assurance systems (Brown, 2004; Ashwin, 2006).

The most recent phase of quality assurance arrangements in England started with the establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 1997. Since then, higher education institutions have had to undertake two quality assurance techniques: assessment and quality audit. This was first carried out as two separate processes (Institutional Audit and Universal Subject Review) and since 2002 combined under the 'Institutional Audit' (QAA, 2003). This review process constitutes the centre of the externally driven quality assurance that universities have to undergo, based mainly on a self assessment report which is then followed by a review visit. As stated in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Handbook for Institutional Audits (2002b), this process 'is intended to combine scrutiny of internal quality assurance systems at an institutional level with investigations of how those systems operate at the level of the discipline' (QAA, 2002b:1). Institutional audits focus on the examination of three aspects: the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance

structures and mechanisms; the accuracy, completeness and reliability of the information that higher education institutions publish about the quality of programmes and the standards of awards; and examples of the internal quality assurance processes at work at the level of the programme, to reveal the validity and reliability of the information generated by these internal processes.

The revised method that includes both processes together, was established as a result of the realisation of the massive cost of the previous arrangements to the institutions, as well as the burden it placed on academics and institutions as a whole (Blackmore, 2004). It also represents a step forward in returning some institutional autonomy (Harvey, 2005). The present quality assurance arrangements for higher education institutions in England are rather new – they were established in 2002 – and they have continued to change following the academic review of subjects which was completed by the end of 2006, leaving institutional audits as the main external evaluation tool, replacing discipline audit trails with institutional audits that generate less burden on the institutions (QAA, 2006).

The main goal of the external audit is to review the correct functioning of the institution and then to provide feedback to the institution regarding their internal processes of quality assurance. These internal processes are considered to be the core of the quality assurance system in higher education institutions and they seem to be widely accepted as the main means for the assurance and enhancement of quality within institutions, as they have prevailed over the modifications during the last decade. As Morley (2003) notices in the evolution of the external evaluation arrangements, there has been a move from quality control – concerned with the inspection of outputs – towards quality assurance which focuses on auditing the mechanisms for the management of quality embedded in the process. The discussion that sets in here is whether this quality assurance arrangement actually leads to improvement.

In the current debate, quality enhancement is an issue. The Quality Assurance Agency' documentation states that quality enhancement is not the main focus of the agency's activities, but a responsibility of institutions, and it should come about as a consequence of their academic management (QAA, 2002a). However, as was discussed in the previous section, this assumption does not seem to be the case. External quality assurance is mostly associated with accountability rather than enhancement, as it is more concerned with the past rather than the future, and it is perceived as not being able to transform teaching and learning practice (Middlehurst, 1997; Lomas, 2003; Hoecht, 2006).

In his investigation of how academics perceive quality in their work life, Newton (2002) reports that quality assurance is identified as bureaucracy, inspection and intrusion, distracting staff from their teaching tasks. Although he found evidence that academics are not fully 'playing the game' but somehow adapting the requirements according to their specific context, quality assurance arrangements still tend to promote compliance and conformity rather than enhancement (Middlehurst, 1997; Newton, 2002; Harvey, 2005).

Harvey (2005) moves forward suggesting where improvement lies:

> 'In general, formal external evaluations have accountability and compliance focuses rather than the encouragement of continuous quality improvement of the student experience. In most institutions where it occurs, improvement of the student experience is a function of internal review and monitoring processes, usually heavily reliant, nowadays, on student feedback, examiners reports, internal improvement audits, periodic revalidation of programmes of study and staff teams critically self-reflecting on their everyday practice.' (Harvey, 2005: 273)

He continues by arguing that all internal processes of quality monitoring have a greater effect on the quality of the provision that students are receiving than the external monitoring processes (Harvey, 2005). As a result, the challenge for quality enhancement moves into the internal sphere.

Internal quality assurance procedures

Internal mechanisms for quality assurance and quality enhancement are part of the requirements that higher education institutions have implemented as part of their responsibility for the quality of their programmes. These mechanisms should be in line with the Code of Practice established by the Quality Assurance Agency, but each institution has the responsibility for setting up adequate procedures that assure the academic quality of their programmes according to their internal standards (QAA, 2002b). Consequently, although institutions might have fairly similar internal quality assurance procedures in terms of their aims, they may be set up differently according to their own internal organisation and structure.

The Code of Practice is part of the infrastructure devised by the Quality Assurance Agency to guide on good practice in relation to internal management of quality and standards within higher education institutions. The code of practice currently has 10 sections which have been elaborated between 1998 and 2001, and many of them have undergone revisions

to maintain their currency. Each section covers a specific aspect that institutions should consider in their internal quality assurance arrangements. Each section of the code is organised as a list of precepts or principles that institutions should comply with (QAA, 2003).

Of the ten sections, section seven is dedicated to setting out the 'formal and effective procedures' that institutions should have in place for the approval, monitoring and review of their programmes of study, as a way to ensure that 'standards, quality and the means for quality enhancement are designed in the programmes from the outset' (QAA, 2000b:5). Additionally, section one indicates some additional procedures, related to student feedback and representation strategies, that institutions should consider implementing as part of their quality assurance mechanisms (QAA, 2004a).

The precepts presented in these two sections of the code and with which higher education institutions should comply, are rather general and do not offer a specific indication of the mechanisms to be implemented. The precepts are however accompanied by explanations and guidance on how those principles could be attained. It is in these further descriptions where it is possible to find the particular procedures which institutions have implemented.

The QAA's Code of Practice states that programmes of study should undergo a review of their effectiveness and also of their validity and relevance. Monitoring the effectiveness of programmes is regarded as a regular process, usually undertaken by the team in charge of the course, aiming to evaluate their performance at the end of each academic year. Among the information suggested for consideration in this monitoring process are: external examiners' reports (and those of any other accrediting bodies), feedback from staff and students, student progress information, and feedback from former students and employers. The review of programme validity, on the other hand, is considered to be a periodic and institutional process that should involve external participants (QAA, 2000b). Further guidance regarding student and staff feedback and student representation are presented in the section for postgraduate programmes. Although this advice might not necessarily be applied across all programmes, they may influence how institutions organise their internal quality assurance arrangements as a whole. According to the Code of Practice, these particular mechanisms, regardless of the specific form of implementation, are intended to monitor the quality of the programmes of study in order to identify strengths and weaknesses, and accordingly, to put in place the necessary actions to rectify any problem identified. In other words, these procedures should help academic staff to assure and

enhance the quality of their programmes.

The question that arises here is whether their implementation is actually contributing to these purposes. Looking at the focus on compliance that external scrutiny has in institutions, and academics' perception of the quality assurance process as bureaucracy (Newton, 2002; Harvey, 2005), it remains an issue that every institution and academic may be managing differently. In this respect, Biggs (2001) suggests that for quality enhancement to be possible, institutions need to remove the internal factors that discourage quality. Among these inhibiting factors, he highlights three common internal quality assurance procedures that may pose risks for enhancement: external examiners, validation panels and student feedback questionnaires. The problem with external examiners is that sometimes they are only focusing on assessment without providing an overall review of the processes that lead to assessment. With regard to validation panels, Biggs suggests they tend to discourage innovation as they are usually focused on the content of the programmes. He also indicates that student questionnaires are frequently measuring the teachers rather than the teaching process, and that students tend to penalise academics using alternative methods (Biggs, 2001). Harvey (2002) gives a deeper insight. Reporting on the views of quality assurance practitioners, he highlights two major elements influencing the minimised effect of these procedures for enhancement. First, there is the perception from academic staff that quality assurance is an 'event', specifically oriented to comply with external requirements, rather than a process; and second, that despite the generalised view that the main benefit of the external monitoring is internal self reflection, institutions develop what Harvey calls 'dual self evaluation', where one is for external consumption and another for internal use, and their contents are not the same (Harvey, 2002).

This tension between compliance and enhancement appears to be the main issue regarding the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance procedures within higher education institutions. In this context, it is surprising to discover a lack of theoretical approaches to analyse this tension in the literature reviewed. The framework developed by Barnett (1994b) partially fills this gap and constitutes the only theoretical work on the implementation of quality assurance procedures that it was possible to find. Furthermore, this framework introduces a very interesting analysis that represents a highly valuable contribution to this discussion.

Barnett (1994b) analyses the tension between compliance and enhancement in terms of the main driving forces of the quality assurance procedures in place in higher education

institutions, namely the state and academe. The starting point for analysing and classifying quality assurance systems is the issue of control. Quality systems may be under the control of the state (as an external party to the university) or they might be owned by the academic community. However, Barnett recognises a tension in this division as the assumption that state-owned evaluations would tend to be bureaucratic in character and those under the control of the academic community would be more professionally driven are not always true in practice. He exemplifies:

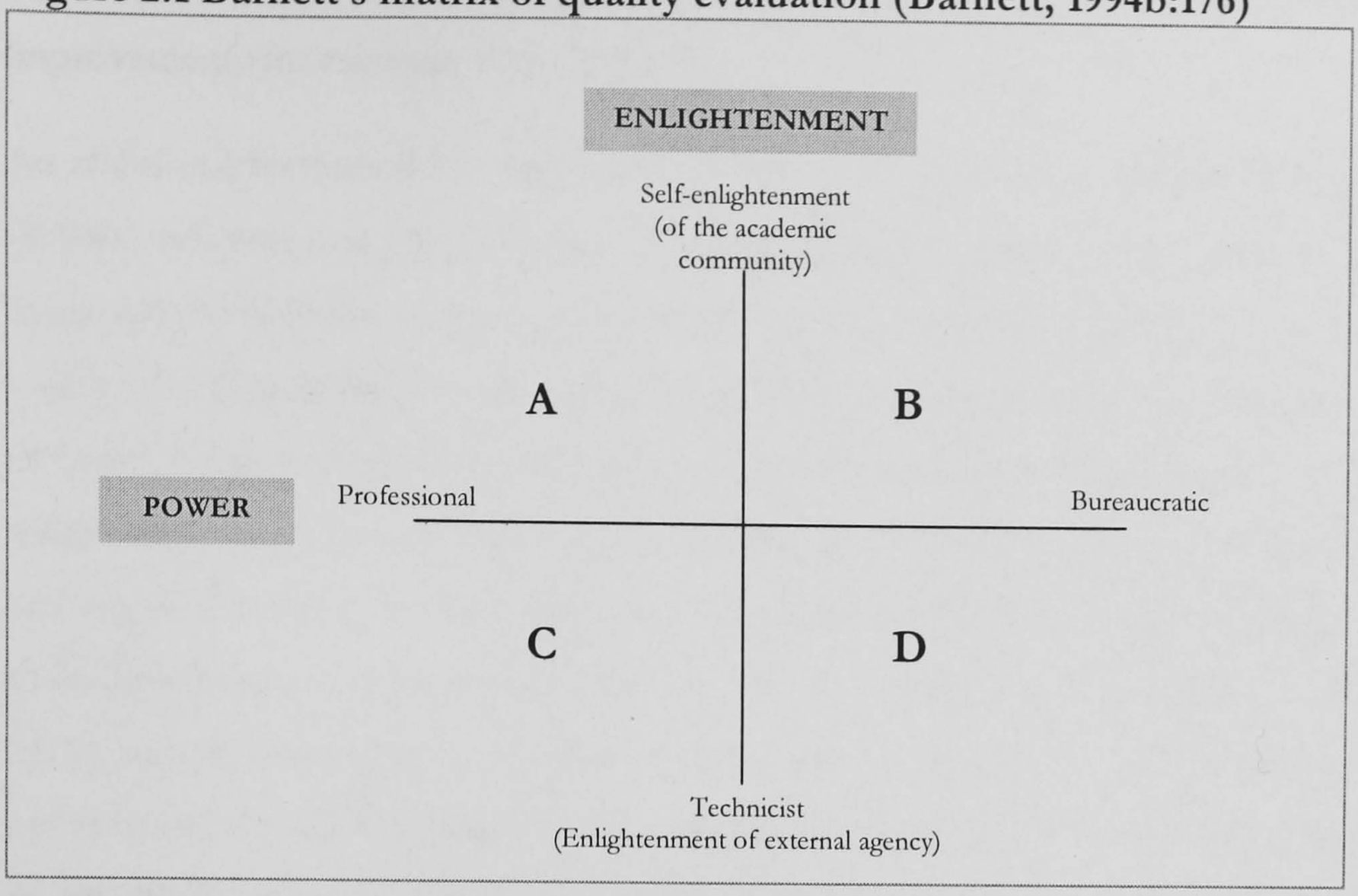
> ...academics setting up evaluation systems for the first time may resort to fairly bureaucratic systems, perhaps because evaluation is seen merely as an inconvenience without any beneficial effect on the teaching process and only the formalities are observed. (Barnett, 1994b: 169)

Based on this, Barnett makes the distinction between control and process. The owner of the evaluation is the party who maintains control, and this may or may not be the same person or group who carries out the evaluation. To identify who owns a particular quality evaluation, the question to ask is: in whose interests is it operating? In the university context, the question is whether the control is internal or external to the academic community.

The process on the other hand, is a separate issue, independent from who owns the evaluation. It refers to the form and character of the process of the evaluation itself. As indicated earlier, there is an inclination to believe that externally controlled evaluations would tend to be bureaucratic, superficial and focused on numerical indicators. However, a system driven by an external agency or institutional managers could also be based on professional values and be reflection-oriented to promote future improvements. To identify the character of the process the question to ask is: who would be the audience which would benefit from the results of the evaluation?

Barnett (1994b) displays these two points as a matrix under which quality assurance mechanisms can be classified. Barnett's matrix is presented in Figure 2.1; in this grid the 'enlightenment' axis represents the process: the audience who would be benefiting from the results of a quality assurance procedure application; and the 'power' axis represents where the control over the procedure lies, that could be external or 'bureaucratic' or internal to the academic community, called 'professional'.

Figure 2.1 Barnett's matrix of quality evaluation (Barnett, 1994b:176)



The matrix is comprised of four areas, under which it would be possible to classify quality assurance mechanisms: the top left and right quadrants (A and B) would locate quality evaluations which are internally benefiting the academic community, while the bottom left and right quadrants (C and D) would contain quality methods which are orientated to external audiences; hence providing no benefits to the academic community using them. In this way, regardless of who owns the mechanisms, and in terms of the tension between compliance and enhancement discussed earlier, the mechanisms located in the top sections (A and B) would be those which are implemented for quality enhancement, and those located in the bottom areas (C and D) are carried out to comply with external requirements.

The value of Barnett's (1994b) framework is the inclusion, as part of the analysis of the procedures, of the possibility of considering a mechanism as being owned externally to the academic community, hence bureaucratic, and to be acting for the purpose of enhancement; and more radically, it opens the possibility that a mechanism, although owned internally by the academic community, can be in practice highly 'technicist' and oriented only to comply with external requirements. These double-sided aspects of the procedures contrast with the underlying assumptions identified in the discussion regarding quality assurance and quality enhancement. As presented earlier, the discussion is usually centred on the dichotomy externally versus internally driven mechanisms: externally driven procedures are associated with accountability functions, focused on compliance rather than

enhancement, while internally driven mechanisms are focused on the process and aimed at improvement (for example Harvey, 2002).

An additional feature of this framework is its context and time-bound application. Barnett (1994b) indicates that the position of any particular procedures in this matrix is defined by the particular features of the mechanism under study, and the particular context and time in which it is being applied. In the exercise carried out by Barnett (1994b) based on the different forms of evaluation in practice in Europe, he identifies that there is a tendency for mechanisms to be grouped in the bottom-right area (D) of the grid, i.e. owned by the state and oriented towards external audiences. He claims however that original higher education evaluative practices were placed in the top-left (A) as they were 'internal, self-interested and led to the self-development of the academic community' (Barnett, 1994b:176) and that the move towards more bureaucratic and technicist procedures has been in part a consequence of the state's efforts to gain more control, and the market driven influence over the higher education system. The degree of change in the picture representing practice presented by Barnett at the moment of his writing (1994) compared to today's situation, may be the subject of an analysis outside the scope of this research project.

Quality assurance of online learning

From the above review it seems clear that quality assurance for the purpose of enhancement could be achieved through an appropriate internal management of quality. Within this internal sphere, course teams review their programmes in order to identify the aspects that require improvement, and plan to take action upon them. Consequently, the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance procedures acquires a central role, as it is only if these mechanisms work properly that institutions can ensure the quality of their provision is maintained and improved.

Although this effectiveness for enhancement is put under question by some authors, it seems that the validity of the procedures themselves is not. Internal quality procedures are considered to be the place where an enhancement process can be carried out (Harvey, 2005) and thus they are accepted as an appropriate mechanism for quality assurance. The difficulties seem to arise when these internal procedures, on implementation, start being perceived by staff as mechanisms for accountability, and consequently losing the potential to be a self-reflecting tool, and they become instead only a 'game' to be played for outside

observers. The challenge then is related to the way in which these procedures are being implemented by the institutions and the associated role placed upon them, rather than on the procedures themselves. The exploration of the factors that may be influencing this situation however falls beyond the scope of this research project.

It is possible to identify a further challenge in the implementation of internal quality assurance procedures in higher education institutions. As reviewed in the previous section, these internal procedures such as student feedback questionnaires, annual reviews and student representation, have been created and designed on the whole with face-to-face courses in mind. This is because they were, and in some cases continue to be, the main mode of provision of traditional higher education institutions. The QAA recommends that higher education institutions use these mechanisms to assist them for the processes of assuring and enhancing the quality of all their courses. The main issue of concern is that the range of delivery modes of courses on offer is increasingly more diverse. In particular, higher education institutions, as discussed previously, are expanding their online provision. The question that emerges therefore is whether these internal quality assurance mechanisms are also effective for every type of course provided by the institution, and particularly whether they are effective to assure and enhance the quality of online learning courses.

As higher education institutions have increased their online learning provision, governments, international bodies, quality assurance agencies and other professional bodies are becoming increasingly interested in identifying the appropriate ways to assure the quality of e-learning provision (Parker, 2004). As Oliver states, 'e-learning as a teaching and learning activity, has been caught up in the quality agenda' (Oliver, 2005:175). This growing concern can also be observed in the growing amount of initiatives, projects and literature that could be found regarding the quality of, in and for e-learning at international and local levels. Examples of these initiatives are the projects on quality funded by the European Commission eLearning Programme: the European Quality Observatory (EQO), the Supporting Excellence in eLearning (SEEL), and the Sustainable Environment for the Evaluation of Quality in eLearning (SEEQUEL). Also, in 2004 the European Foundation for Quality in eLearning (EFQUEL) was founded as a continuation initiative to some of the these projects (European Commission, 2006).

While there is certainly a genuine concern on how to assure the quality of online provision in higher education, the primary question to explore is whether quality assurance

mechanisms should be different for online learning than for campus-based programmes. The literature analyses this question from three different perspectives: from the borderless higher education approach, the distance learning, and the campus-based traditions. The views gathered from these three perspectives agree in considering that quality assurance arrangements of e-learning should be different when compared with traditional distance learning and on-campus modes of delivery. They present some differences in the level of detail with which they approach this analysis, yet combined they offer a clear overview of the e-learning aspects potentially impacting quality assurance arrangements (O'Shea, Bearman and Downes, 1996; Tait, 1999; CVCP, 2000; Hope, 2001; Middlehurst, 2001; Harvey, 2002; Roffe, 2002; Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Stella and Gnanam, 2004; Walmsley, 2004; Connolly, Jones and O'Shea, 2005).

There was one source found to have a different position regarding this issue. Reporting on the conclusions of the symposium carried out in 2000 where sixteen higher education leaders gathered to discuss quality in distributed learning, Twigg (2001) states that 'if new forms of quality assurance are needed, they are needed for all aspects of the educational experience, not just for distance learning' (Twigg, 2001:13). What is relevant to note in this perspective is that it emanates from a group of practitioners that belong to a different tradition of quality assurance than the other authors reviewed. The symposium reported by Twigg (2001) was attended by leaders of American higher education institutions and accrediting associations, and their position regarding quality assurance arrangements can be understood when reviewing their context and the analysis carried out to reach that position. As was mentioned earlier, the American system of quality assurance is based on accreditation, focusing on the evaluation of inputs: syllabus, faculty credentials, existence of quality reviews, etc. As these factors, in their view, are true for both modalities, they conclude there is no need to transform quality assurance mechanisms for e-learning (Twigg, 2001).

The difference in positions appears to be in the level of analysis. Although Twigg's report acknowledges the differences in how e-learning implementation differs from traditional on-campus mode of delivery, the conclusion that no changes are necessary arises at the level of current general quality assurance practices and assessing whether they are 'true' (or not) for the online environment, rather than analysing if the online environment is bringing up any new elements which challenge current practices. It is this type of examination on which the literature supporting the need of modifications is rich in details.

E-learning's distinct features and quality assurance

The main argument supporting the revision of the quality assurance arrangements is based on the identifiable differences between e-learning and the two other modalities, distance and campus-based learning. Among the variety of elements described as distinctive to online learning, there are four main aspects that seem relevant for the present analysis regarding quality assurance: disaggregated processes, coordinated teamwork, availability for inspection, and student access.

The first difference between conventional on-campus and online learning is its disaggregated structure; in this context, the design, teaching, assessment, award, etc. of an online course become separated processes undertaken by different teams or which may be outsourced. This partitioning means courses are no longer the sole responsibility of one person who would take care of the whole process. Harvey (2002) suggests this feature is two-edged; a positive effect is that the different aspects of a course may be undertaken by specialised professionals who can contribute to build the quality of the course; on the negative side, it can affect the ownership of the course, and pose particular challenges to quality, as responsibility moves between parties (CVCP, 2000; Harvey, 2002; Robinson, 2004). Hope (2001) goes further stating that in this disaggregated environment quality assurance should be looking for mechanisms that ensure that staff are competent for all the tasks required and that the procedures for outsourcing are guided by best practice in each field.

This disaggregated configuration also affects the organisation of the teams. Academics no longer work in isolation, as is commonly found in face-to-face environments. Online courses require teams to work collaboratively, as academic staff need to interact with many other professionals who are involved in the different phases of course design and delivery. This diversity of parties brings up challenges in terms of communication and coordination, and the need for a more detailed planning of the internal processes in a way that usually runs against the 'vertical units of organisation' of traditional higher education institutions (Robinson, 2004; Walmsley, 2004; Connolly, Jones and O'Shea, 2005). Bates (2000; 2004) goes further, identifying this organisational challenge as the need for universities to carry out online course development and delivery using a 'project management' approach. This approach is based on the recognition that online courses require the input of different professionals – instructional designers, content experts, technical staff, among others – who should be coordinated by a 'project manager' who would plan, manage and control

the workload and quality of the projects.

The specific challenges that this different approach to course management represents to quality assurance are related to the capacity of institutions to acclimatise themselves within this new organisational environment, and to the specific responsibilities regarding quality. The way universities are coping with e-learning seems to be rather informal, as e-learning still tends to exist as a marginal activity rather than being integrated into the mainstream university structure (Robinson, 2004). Regarding responsibilities, Robinson (2004) points out that academic staff continue to be liable for the quality of their courses, however she argues quality assurance mechanisms should recognise the role and responsibility that other participants have towards this as well.

The third feature of e-learning is its visibility or availability for inspection. As content, resources and communications among participants are mainly text-based and archived in the online environment, their review, and monitoring of the activities are easier, potentially more in depth, continuous and unobtrusive than in face-to-face and traditional distance learning courses. In addition, the recognition of areas which are actually of better quality than face-to-face, is facilitated (Harvey, 2002; Fielding, Harris and King, 2004). This feature has a particular impact on the way in which monitoring is recorded, and consequently, how auditing is carried out, as record keeping may need to move from paper trails towards online monitoring of processes (CVCP, 2000).

The last feature that distinguishes online learning comes as a direct consequence of the distant location of students; this is the more limited access staff have to students, compared with face-to-face teaching and learning, and which has direct implications for the collection of feedback (Walmsley, 2004). It is interesting however that in the literature reviewed, this aspect was not mentioned as often as expected, as it is a particular and rather obvious characteristic of the online learning environment when compared with campus-based courses. The opportunity to contact students on a more frequent basis through electronic means (as opposed to weekly contact in a traditional face-to-face course) may be perceived as expanding access to students rather than limiting it. In other words, given that students are expected to be online, tutors may assume that they can contact them at any time.

These distinctive features of e-learning pose a real challenge to the way quality assurance is managed in higher education institutions. Phipps et al. (1998) report however there are no major differences in the strategies for quality assurance implemented in online learning programmes when compared to traditional campus-based courses. In their comparative

study they found that existing quality assurance strategies of e-learning programmes look similar to on-campus ones, as they are focusing on the same four aspects: staff credentials, time on task measures, student support, and goals and outcomes. The most important differences found were the stronger tendency of quality assurance of online programmes to be more orientated towards institutional assessment, and to guarantee that the capacities to assure quality are in place. Also the quality reviews tend to be led by the administration rather than academics (Phipps, Wellman and Merisotis, 1998).

According to the above review it seems that the principles by which quality assessment operates in online learning are not put into question; and indeed, they are expected to be the same as for any other modality. However the distinctive features of e-learning pose challenges to the quality assurance arrangements, thus adaptation is needed in the mechanisms by which institutions look for evidence to judge the quality of a programme. In her review of the implications that the development of new forms of higher education teaching and learning have had on quality assurance arrangements, Middlehurst (2001) indicates some of the adaptations that would be needed. Her suggestions are however rather general, providing an overview of the diversity of issues to consider but with no specific pointers as to how the mechanisms should be modified. Similarly, Roffe (2002) and Hope (2001) also attempt to provide implications for quality assurance arrangement, but they are also unsuccessful in providing clear pointers on how arrangements should be adapted. What appears then is that the discussion around the implications for quality assurance of online learning is kept focused on the indicators that are no longer valid or appropriate in the online environment; for example, measurements of the size of library holdings, full time appointments, or PhD qualification of staff, among others. On the other hand, the suggestions about what could or should be included are rather general, like the need for review systems to be able to monitor online modules and the need to revise or eventually replace the peer review system (Hope, 2001; Middlehurst, 2001; Roffe, 2002).

Notwithstanding this lack of detailed pointers in the analysis of the adaptations that should be carried out to make the quality assurance mechanisms appropriate for the online environment, practitioners are currently implementing a range of strategies to look after the quality of their online programmes. The most relevant of these strategies for higher education institutions are reviewed in the next section.

Current practice of quality assurance of online learning

At present there are a variety of approaches and strategies with which higher education institutions and programmes tackle the issue of quality assurance of online learning. These approaches can be grouped into four main types: the approach of large open and distance universities; the quality standards and guidelines developed by various organisations to guide design and development of good quality online learning; the accreditation systems provided by regional, national or international agencies; and benchmarking tools, which are nowadays becoming widely used.

a) Open and distance universities

In their review of how well open and distance universities are coping with external quality assurance, O'Shea et al. (1996) highlight that quality is best supported when it is embedded in each of the stages of course design, production and delivery, in line with an institution-wide mission and aims, standards and expected level of service, widely shared by staff; and when each activity includes the mechanisms for the students and staff to feed back on their experience. They also suggest that considering the way open and distance universities work, these institutions are better prepared than campus-based universities to operate quality assurance. This argument is also supported by other authors (like Johnston, 1999) who are usually coming from a distance learning tradition. In their view, large open and distance universities have the structure and organisation where the assurance of quality is embedded, and hence their move towards online delivery does not require any major adaptation, as they are already including the distinctive features of this mode of delivery. In this sense, the review of their practice may provide some indications as to how campus-based universities could deal with this issue.

The case studies presented in Tait's book *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Selected Case Studies* (1997) show that the quality assurance systems in a range of open and distance universities around the world are essentially very similar, most of them influenced by the UK Open University. Reviewing the mechanisms in place in the Open Universities of Israel, Hong Kong, India and the UK, it seems that these universities have a strategy to assure the quality of their courses which is embedded in their organisational structure. Also, Universitas 21 Global (U21G), which only provides postgraduate online education, has a quality assurance strategy similar to the systems implemented in large open distance

learning universities described in Tait's (1997) book. For the implementation of their quality assurance strategies, U21G has established U21Pedagogica, a subsidiary organisation dedicated to reviewing and approving all their programmes (Chua and Lam, 2007). Table 2.1 summarises examples of the most common ways in which these providers have set up their internal quality assurance strategy for the processes of course approval, development, delivery and evaluation.

Table 2.1 Overview quality assurance strategies in open and distance universities

Course approval	The processes that lead to the approval of a programme or course are very similar, with differences related to the structure and organisation of the academic boards and committees within each institution. In this process two elements are worth mention: ▪ Proposals for new courses tend to be very detailed, including not only academic definitions but also infrastructure and services required for their delivery. In some cases they also include samples of the type of materials to be developed. ▪ The approval steps not only include internal peer review but also an extensive review by several external experts.
Course development	Generally, the process of development of a course takes between 1 to 5 years. Given the division of labour that characterises the development of open and distance courses, the process is led by a course coordinator (project managers) who is in charge of the programme from its development, throughout its delivery and evaluation. An important element in this process is the training and orientation that experts receive to participate in the team and to produce the written materials. This training varies from formal orientation sessions, to pairing them with a team member who will guide them during the process (in the case of external experts). Although not necessarily expressly stated, the development of materials and resources is guided by predefined standards of the quality that each element has to have.
Course delivery	During the delivery of a course, quality is assured by a range of strategies, such as: ▪ Rigorous procedures for the appointment of Tutors who will be supporting students. ▪ Tutors' appointment is based on a flexible hiring policy. ▪ Tutors are trained for online teaching before they start their work with students. ▪ Tutors are in charge of a predefined maximum number of students. ▪ Assignments marked by tutors are randomly checked by coordinators to guarantee common standards. ▪ Tutors' work is monitored by senior academic staff
Course evaluation	▪ Students complete an evaluation of the learning experience ▪ Tutor's performance is evaluated by students and senior academic staff ▪ Tutors complete an evaluation of the course (materials, pedagogy, assessment, workload, etc.)

(Guri-Rosenblit, 1997; Koul, 1997; O'Shea and Downes, 1997; Robertshaw, 1997; Chua and Lam, 2007)

The approach that open and distance universities have established to assure the quality of their provision is fairly structured and the protocols are well established and organised. Twigg (2001) describes them as 'internal centralised structures for controlling quality'.

Certainly, open and distance universities' approach to quality assurance is embedded in the overall institution's structure which is already organised around a highly disaggregated configuration, and coordinated by a strong central management.

The implications of this approach for quality assurance of online learning seem to be straightforward. Online learning has been defined for this research project as the use of technology for distance and flexible provision. Since online mode of delivery is also part of the provision offered by open and distance universities, the strategies implemented in these institutions could be easily transferred and applied to the online courses they have started to offer. However, the appropriateness of this approach for online courses offered by conventional campus-based institutions is not that simple. Chua and Lam (2007) point out that the problem of the quality assurance processes implemented in large open and distance universities is that they are expensive and time consuming, in addition to needing adaptation for implementing in traditional campus-based universities.

Furthermore, Pollock and Cornford (2000) – based on a study of the integration of technology in traditional campus-based universities – concluded that the process of integrating technology in higher education institutions is extremely difficult, mainly as a result of the way universities are organised. They describe it like this:

> Further, in the site that we studied, there were aspects of the University that were crucial for the success of the projects and that did not exist and therefore had to be built – for instance, the University lacked procedures for validating online courses – slowing the whole process. In short, initiatives were confounded by difficulties in co-ordinating a wide range of actors across a large organisation made up of diverse and disparate entities (i.e., departments and service units). It is, it seems, the very institution of the university which is at the heart of the problem. (Pollock and Cornford, 2000)

Considering these observations, and given that the quality assurance approach of open and distance education universities is rooted in its structure, it would seem that its value for traditional on-campus institutions is limited to specific and particular mechanisms that could be transferred, rather than as an overall strategy, as this would imply the revamping of the structure of campus-based institutions. Several mechanisms however seem to be valuable, for example some of the coordinating strategies, which enable the disaggregated nature of online delivery to be overcome, are not usually present in traditional on-campus

environments.

b) Quality standards and guidelines

A different and widely used strategy aiming to assure the quality of online education has been implemented through the development of quality standards, guidelines and benchmarks. Hope (2001) argues that the main consequence of the use of technology in the provision of education is its globalisation, that has led, at local, national and regional levels to the production of a large number of quality standards and frameworks designed to certify and protect the quality of local providers, and to help students to choose in a global market. McLoughlin and Visser (2003) attribute a more economic motivation to the creation of these guidelines, at least in the US, as they help to strengthen leadership in the area, as well as to protect the market from bogus providers. Beyond their use to protect markets and users, these quality standards and guidelines are a useful tool for practitioners and institutions providing guidance on how to design, develop, deliver and evaluate online learning courses.

The US has been the most prolific generator of these guidelines, but they are common in many other countries. A significant number of quality standards and guidelines are currently available for online learning, some of which are presented in Table 2.2.

Confronted with the increasing number of quality standards for e-learning being developed in the US, Frydenberg (2002) carried out a comparative analysis of the standards available, proposing a matrix to examine, compare and contrast them. The matrix is bound by the nine domains, which she found are repeatedly described as quality standards from the educator standpoint. These are: institutional commitment; technology; student services; instructional design and course development; instruction and instructors; delivery; finances; regulatory and legal compliance; and evaluation. For each domain she compared what the different guidelines were suggesting, noticing only small differences in the categorisation of some domains, demonstrating that, generally, these standards produce comparable criteria with which to evaluate the quality of online courses.

Table 2.2 List of quality standards and guidelines

Organisation / Author	Standards / Guidelines	URL / Source
The Institute for Higher Education Policy – IHEP	Quality on the line	www.ihep.com
American Federation of Teachers – AFT	Guidelines for Good Practice	www.aft.org/higher_ed
American Council on Education – ACE	Guiding Principles for Distance Learning in a Learning Society & Distance Learning Evaluation Guide	www.acenet.edu
Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications – WCET	Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs.	www.wcet.info
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education – QAA	Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)	www.qaa.ac.uk
Norwegian Association for Distance Education – NADE	NADE Standards	www.nettskolen.com
UNESCO/OECD	Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education	www.unesco.org/education/hed/guidelines
SLOAN-C	Quality Framework and the Five Pillars	www.sloan-c.org
Inglis, Ling and Joosten	Quality Framework	In Inglis, Ling, and Joosten (2002)
European Institute for E-Learning – EifEL	Open eQuality Learning Standards	www.eife-l.org

(Bo, 1997; Phipps and Merisotis, 2000; Hope, 2001; AFT, 2002; Frydenberg, 2002; QAA, 2004b; Inglis, 2005; Moore, 2005; UNESCO, 2005)

In assessing the value of guidelines and standards as a quality assurance mechanism, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (Phipps and Merisotis, 2000) conducted a study to validate these benchmarks in order to ascertain the degree to which they were incorporated in the policies, procedures and practices of six higher education institutions that were recognised leaders in distance education in the US. The first part of the research included a literature search of benchmarks published by different institutions that resulted in a list of forty-five benchmarks specifically oriented to internet-based distance education. Then, staff, administrators and students were visited at the institutions identified as leaders in

Internet-based distance education. They were surveyed on the presence and importance of each of the forty-five benchmarks, to determine to what extent they were being followed; and whether they made a difference in terms of academic quality. The results of the survey were presented as a list of twenty-four benchmarks that were considered essential to ensure quality in Internet-based distance education and organised into seven areas: institutional support; course development; teaching/learning; course structure; student support; faculty support; and evaluation and assessment (Phipps and Merisotis, 2000).

Overall, these benchmarks represent a distillation of what was thought to be good practice for practitioners and institutions, as they provide standards to aim for while designing, delivering and evaluating online courses, and in this sense they offer a very useful tool for assuring quality. It is not possible however to regard them as a mechanism in themselves, as they are only descriptions of what good practice in online learning is.

c) Accreditation systems

The use of accreditation systems is closely related to quality guidelines. Accreditation, as a formal process of enquiry against a set of agreed standards, is a well-established quality assurance mechanism, particularly in the US where no national quality assurance agency exists. In the context of online provision, this approach to quality assurance is growing among providers (Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003). But it is not only in the US that it is possible to find certification of online activities and institutions. Canada has a national certification of quality provided by FuturEd.com, and in the UK two agencies offer this service. Table 2.3 gives an overview of some of the most relevant accreditation providers for online provision currently available.

Accrediting agencies build their certification systems on quality standards and guidelines specially devised for this purpose. All agencies have similar procedures that lead to certification. They are all voluntary. The process requires the submission of materials and a self-evaluation report according to the standards set by the agency. After that, the institution receives a visit from a panel of examiners and evaluators to verify the conditions in the field and to carry out interviews. Some agencies also contact students who may be interviewed or surveyed. The resulting certification usually lasts for a period between 3 and 5 years; some last for the life of the material or course.

Table 2.3 Accreditation providers

Agency	Certification	URL
Global Alliance on Transnational Education – GATE	GATE Accreditation	www.edugate.org
American Society for Training & Development – ASTD	E-Learning Courseware Certification ECC	www.astd.org/ecertification/
Distance Education and Training Council – DETC	DETC Accreditation	www.detc.org
British Learning Association – BLA	Quality Mark	www.british-learning.org.uk
Open and Distance Learning Quality Council – ODL QC	ODL QC Quality Mark	www.odlqc.org.uk
FuturEd & QualitE-Learning Assurance	eQCHECK	www.futured.com

(Eaton, 2001; Hope, 2001; Twigg, 2001; OBHE, 2003)

In the US, where the mechanism for quality assurance is based on accreditation, agencies have included online provision as part of their accreditation services and have also encouraged the establishment of new specialised agencies. The Pew Report suggests that the increasing number of accrediting agencies comes as a result of a trend towards external examination as a way to ensure quality (Twigg, 2001). In other countries with well-established national quality assurance systems, like England, accreditation as a mechanism to certify the quality of e-learning institutions and programmes is also gaining a foothold. However, the majority of the institutions that look for an accreditation of this type are corporate organisations; there are few higher and further education institutions among its holders.

The value of accreditation as a quality assurance system for online learning relies on the quality and prestige of the agency providing the certification and the thoroughness of their review process. From the point of view of dual mode higher education institutions, accreditation could be a useful mechanism by which the quality of online provision may be certified on a programme basis (as opposed to whole-institution certification), which would allow specific programmes to look for external accreditation in addition to any other internal quality assurance mechanism already in place in the institution.

d) Benchmarking

The use of benchmarking as a tool for evaluating e-learning is rather new, although it draws upon a larger base of experience on benchmarking in other areas, such as administrative processes. Benchmarking as a tool for quality assurance is very much related to quality standards and guidelines, although these are not necessarily plainly transferable into a benchmarking tool, and it is argued that benchmarking could be carried out without any explicit standard as a reference (ENQA, 2003; Bacsich, 2005b).

Benchmarking involves the comparison of the quality of a product or service against other providers. Usually the 'other providers' are selected based on competition, thematic areas, or just those deemed to be 'the best' of the others. Its main function is to be a self-evaluation and self-improvement tool by which an institution identifies its own position, compares it with others and then designs an improvement plan to close the gap (Jackson, 2001; Bacsich, 2005b; Inglis, 2005).

Benchmarking is a tool focused on an overall institutional evaluation, with the general aim being to determine the current position in relation to others, rather than being a judgment of the quality itself. However, as the process of benchmarking usually includes a rather detailed analysis and evaluation of the institutional internal services, processes and capacities, it has potential benefits for quality enhancement.

The tools currently available specifically created or adapted for e-learning are mainly designed to establish the institutional level of development on e-learning. Some of the most well-known benchmarking tools for e-learning are listed in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4 Benchmarking tools

Organisation/Author	Benchmarking tool	URL
The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education	Benchmarking Online Learning	www.obhe.ac.uk
Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)	Embedding Learning Technologies Institutionally – ELTI tools	www.jisc.ac.uk
Paul Bacsich	Pick & Mix approach	www.matic-media.co.uk/benchmarking.htm
Stephen Marshall	e-Learning Maturity Model (eMM)	www.utdc.vuw.ac.nz/research/emm
University of Strathclyde and Kilmarnock College	Scott Morton's MIT90s Model for Institutional Change	elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/pilot2/

National Learning Network – NLN	ILT Self-assessment tool	www.nln.ac.uk
Supporting Excellence in ELearning – SEEL	Seel Benchmarking System	www.eife-l.org
Becta and NCSL	Self-review framework	matrix.becta.org.uk
Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Australia	Benchmarking Framework	science.uniserve.edu.au/courses/benchmarking/

(SCIENTER, 2004; Bacsich, 2005b; Bacsich, 2005a; Inglis, 2005; HEA, 2007)

Benchmarking has recently become an increasingly well-known approach for evaluating e-learning, particularly in England, following on from the HEFCE's e-learning strategy (HEFCE, 2005a) proposed it as a tool to evaluate its success. To that end, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in collaboration with the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) were commissioned to carry out a programme to identify an e-learning benchmarking tool for higher education institutions. The pilot of this programme tested five e-learning benchmarking tools and was carried out in 2006 with the participation of twelve institutions. The benchmarking programme has been extended since then with the addition of two new groups of higher education institutions. Benchmarking Phase 1 included thirty-eight new universities and a further group of twenty-seven institutions have recently been selected to participate in Phase 2 (HEA, 2007).

The programme's stated aims originally included three purposes: to provide higher education institutions with the opportunity to self-evaluate their e-learning development and to identify the extent to which it was embedded in the institution; for universities to be able to compare their level of e-learning development with other universities with similar characteristics; and to get an overall picture of e-learning across the sector (Morrison and Davies, 2005). These goals seem consistent with the main purposes of benchmarking as described earlier, in which the final intention of a benchmarking exercise is to determine the current position of institutions in relation to others of similar character. However, the evaluation of the pilot programme indicates that the third aim could not be addressed due to confidentiality issues (Mayes, 2006). In the two new phases, the programme's documentation has not included the goal of building a national picture of e-learning development, focusing instead on providing opportunities for higher education institutions to make comparisons with other institutions (HEA, 2006). This change of focus of the

programme is an indication of the complexity of issues involved in a benchmarking exercise which is aiming to generate a sector-wide picture. Confidentiality, differences between contexts and selection of common criteria against which to benchmark institutions are some of the issues identified in the pilot as difficult to resolve (Mayes, 2006). It therefore seems reasonable, as the HEA benchmarking programme did, to focus on the intra-institutional benefits of the exercise, reducing the comparability scope to small clusters of institutions. It could be argued, however, that with this move, the HEA benchmarking programme is no longer a benchmarking exercise but rather the promotion of an institutional e-learning self-evaluation orientated towards internal development.

In terms of the value that benchmarking tools might offer as tools for assuring the quality of online courses, it seems that benchmarking works at a different level and for a different purpose (institutional comparison) from quality assurance, making its value for quality assurance and enhancement of courses limited. Although it may be expected that a benchmarking activity eventually provides the basis for improving the quality of the e-learning provision in an institution (eLRC, 2006), this potential benefit might well come as a result of the application of a specific tool (and its specific criteria) rather than from benchmarking as a strategy.

Conclusions

The above review of current practice of quality assurance in online learning reveals the ample concern and debate regarding the quality of online learning. The strategies reviewed however are not equivalent, as they do not operate at the same level, and in that sense, they could be in place simultaneously in the same institution. An example might be a comparison of the approaches of large open and distance universities and certifications. In the former, the mechanisms correspond to internal procedures, and eventually the same institution could seek for certification from external agencies. Similarly, academic staff could be following the quality standards and internally applying them for the development and delivery of their courses, and at an institutional level be carrying out a benchmarking exercise to compare their overall level of development within the sector. Consequently, it would be possible to argue that these strategies could be seen as complementary and offering distinctive mechanisms by which an institution could deal with the quality assurance of their online provision.

Although these strategies could be considered as complementary to the internal quality assurance procedures in place in dual-mode universities, the relationship between them varies. In the case of the approach in operation in open and distance universities, its embedded strategies could also be deployed as quality assurance mechanisms just as the ones observed in dual-mode institutions, and as is already the case for this type of institution in England (for example QAA, 2004c). The adequacy of these mechanisms for online courses in this type of institution is outside the scope of this project; however, it would be possible to suggest that the context on which these quality assurance mechanisms are applied is essentially different to dual-mode institutions, as some of the key features of online learning discussed above are already considered in the structure of the institution itself, hence avoiding the structural difficulties described in Pollock and Cornford's (2000) study.

Accreditation systems are of a different nature when compared with the quality assurance procedures in place in dual-mode institutions. As mentioned above, dual-mode institutions may be seeking accreditation of their e-learning activities alongside their internal mechanisms. The value of accreditation resides in it being an external, and allegedly, objective process oriented to prove to external audiences (prospective students and other stakeholders) that the course or institution under scrutiny is of sufficiently high quality. Under Barnett's (1994b) framework, accreditations could be situated in the extreme bottom right of the matrix, as a mechanism externally-owned and oriented to an external audience; however in this case, this position is not meant to be changed.

Benchmarking on the other hand has a different link with the quality assurance procedures, as the latter are usually one of the aspects to be evaluated as part of the benchmarking exercise. The different benchmarking tools currently being piloted by the Higher Education Academy project give an example of this, as they all include reviewing whether internal quality assurance processes have been adapted for e-learning (see for example ILRT, 2003; Bacsich, 2006). Applying Barnett's matrix, benchmarking could be regarded as a mechanism which is under the control of the institution, although not necessarily under the control of the academic community; and as a process oriented towards external observers, as the main goal is a comparison of the institution with other (similar) providers. It has been suggested however that the activities involved in carrying out a benchmarking exercise entail a self-reflection process which directly benefits practice, and which could be claimed as oriented towards enhancement (eLRC, 2006). Following the same argument,

accreditation processes could similarly involve a useful internal reflective process. Although accreditations and benchmarking have been described as equivalent to quality assurance (Massy, 1996; Inglis, 2005) they could generate improvement as an unplanned effect, but as they are mainly oriented towards external audiences, enhancement would not be part of their core purpose.

Quality standards and guidelines are possibly the approach most closely related to the procedures in place in dual-mode universities, as guidelines are actually an in-built part of the procedures. As was indicated earlier, higher education institutions in England undergo quality assurance reviews carried out periodically by the Quality Assurance Agency, following a set of predefined standards and a code of best practices. One of these codes is dedicated to collaborative and flexible provision that includes e-learning (QAA, 2004b). In this sense, the quality assurance procedures are already guided by a set of quality standards and institutions should be following its precepts. These are oriented, as all other guidelines available, to guide institutions in what constitutes good practice and hence intended to be used as a reference point against which to evaluate practice.

The code of practice relating to e-learning provision however is of a different nature to the ones referred to in the internal management of quality that describe the procedures to assure and enhance quality, which were discussed earlier. The code of practice that covers e-learning is primarily a guide of good practice; in contrast, the codes of practice relating to internal management of quality are defined as a requirement, with which higher education institution should comply. It is this different character of the codes that the focus of this research project is concerned with. The codes of practice describing the ways in which the internal management of standards and quality should be approached by higher education institutions were created mainly for traditional campus-based institutions, and are meant to be applied to all types of institutions. These internal procedures are well-established but they are mainly designed to assure the quality of campus-based courses. Open and distance universities, as reviewed above, have their well-established mechanisms to tackle the quality of their provision, and in their application of the QAA's procedures are already taking into account the distinctive characteristics of e-learning. The challenge is then for 'dual-mode' institutions that need to demonstrate that their online provision is of equal quality to their courses offered by traditional campus-based methods (Hope, 2001; Roffe, 2002) using the same mechanisms.

It may be possible to assume that, considering the accountability-oriented role of the

quality audits, the QAA's mechanisms are able to deal appropriately with the online provision in dual-mode institutions, as its focus would be on determining whether objectives and aims are being achieved (Middlehurst, 1997). It remains less clear however whether the procedures suggested by the QAA are also effective for enhancement. Thus, the question that arises here is whether these internal mechanisms are able to be as effective as tools for assuring and enhancing the quality of online courses as they are for campus-based programmes.

In the next chapter this question is further explored through a revision of current practice of a selected group of higher education institutions and a closer examination of the implementation of quality assurance within institutions. The results of these preliminary studies will serve as the basis to define and refine the research problem and methodology for this project.

Chapter Three

Delimiting the research focus

Campus-based higher education institutions in England currently have several quality assurance mechanisms in place to monitor, maintain and enhance the quality of their courses. The challenge for these procedures emerges in the context of dual-mode institutions, where the same quality assurance mechanisms are being applied to online courses. This challenge can be expressed in two different ways: on the one hand, it may not be possible to transfer some of the aspects to be assessed by the procedures transparently from the face-to-face modality into the online environment, making some of the mechanisms inappropriate for online provision; on the other hand, some key aspects of the online modality – which are absent in a face-to-face situation – may not be considered when applying some procedures, making them ineffective for online provision.

A review of literature and current practice reveals that this area has not yet been researched in detail, leaving dual-mode higher education institutions with the challenge of dealing with the quality assurance of their online courses without the necessary guidance – a challenge of increasing relevance as online provision becomes more regular practice.

This chapter presents two exploratory studies – a survey and a set of interviews – carried out to help define the research problem and refine the research questions, which are then presented at the end of the chapter.

Exploring the research area

Considering the lack of information about how dual-mode universities are addressing the quality assurance and enhancement of their online provision, and as a way to get an overall picture an exploratory survey[1] was undertaken. The specific aims of this survey were to get a closer view of how dual-mode higher education institutions in England were approaching the quality assurance of their online and mixed mode courses, and also to get initial data

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[1] This survey was carried out during October and November 2003

that would provide a first input in the definition of the problem to be investigated. To achieve these goals, the survey focused specifically on traditional campus-based higher education institutions in England that, according to their official websites, were offering online courses in addition to their campus-based programmes.

Two aspects were considered in selecting the data collection method. Data was needed from as many institutions as possible, in order to get an overall picture of current practice. Additionally, the exploratory nature of the study necessitated the collection of basic information regarding their online provision, and their quality assurance policy, practices and associated documentation. In order to meet these goals, and because of the limited resources available, the decision was made to use an online questionnaire.

A brief questionnaire was prepared and trialled online so that the phrasing and organisation of the questions and answering methods could be refined. In addition, this pilot was used to verify the process of automatically populating the results database from the online questionnaires. The final survey form used is presented in Appendix One.

Selection of respondents

Two processes were undertaken to select the institutions and people who would be invited to answer the survey. Firstly, a brief review of the discussion groups on quality assurance available in JISCmail[2] was carried out. This search enabled the creation of a first list of institutions and of people responsible for quality assurance within those institutions. Secondly, the list was updated and expanded based on information provided by the universities' websites. This verified two things: whether the institution was in fact a dual-mode provider, and which people were listed as being currently responsible for quality assurance.

Those institutions which did not present this information through their official websites, or did not provide the names of the personnel in charge of internal quality assurance procedures, were not included in the final list.

The request to complete the online questionnaire was sent out by e-mail to forty-four

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[2] JISCmail - National Academic Mailing List Service (http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk) is a mailing list service sponsored by The Joint Information Systems Committee JISC (www.jisc.ac.uk)

higher education institutions, and was addressed to the person in charge of the institution-wide quality assurance processes.

Questionnaire results

The request was sent out twice. Four responses were received initially. A follow-up message was sent out two weeks later to the non-respondents and yielded a further eight completed questionnaires. Twelve completed responses to the questionnaire were returned in total, constituting 27% of the total targeted.

The respondents held different positions within their institutions (Q1) and were mainly the same people to whom the request had been sent. Their positions were mostly at top management level and were as follows:

- 1 Dean of Quality Development
- 6 Head / Director of Academic Quality or Quality Assurance units
- 3 Deputy Academic Registrars
- 2 Assistant Registrars

Regarding the online provision within their universities, Table 3.1 shows the number of institutions that indicated having each type of provision (fully online or mixed-mode), distinguished by course level (Q2).

Table 3.1 Exploratory survey: answers to question 2 (Q2)

	MODULES			COMPLETE COURSES		
	Under-graduate	Post-graduate	Continuing Professional Development	Under-graduate	Post-graduate	Continuing Professional Development
(i) Fully online	6	5	3	6	5	2
(ii) Mixed-mode or blended	6	9	6	4	9	4
Total	12	14	9	10	14	6

Table 3.2 Exploratory survey: answers to question 3 and 4 (Q3, Q4)

	Yes	No
Number of HEIs that have specific QA PROCEDURES for online and mixed mode delivery	4	8
Number of HEIs that have specific QA DOCUMENTATION for online and mixed mode delivery	3	9

The results show that although the use of e-learning was spread across all levels of provision, it tended to be concentrated at postgraduate level.

Question 3 and question 4 (Q3 and Q4) asked whether the institution had specific quality assurance procedures and documentation for online and mixed-mode delivery. The results indicate that most universities did not (Table 3.2).

To get a closer view of their current practice in relation to each of the quality assurance procedures in place in their institutions, respondents were asked to select for each procedure: its state of development in relation to online courses; whether they were different from the procedures applied to campus-based courses; if they had supplemental elements, or if they were the same as for campus-based courses. A further question was added to capture future developments in the area (Q5).

The results (Table 3.3) show that very few institutions had different quality assurance procedures for their online courses, and only a few had managed the issue by including supplemental documents.

Table 3.3 Exploratory survey: answers to question 5 (Q5)

Procedures and documents for online/mixed mode delivery	Different from campus-based courses	Supplemental to campus-based courses	Same as for campus-based courses	Currently under development	Don't know
QA policy	-	1	9	1	-
Course/module design	-	6	5	-	-
Course/module approval procedure	-	2	9	-	-
Learning and Teaching Strategy	-	1	8	1	-
Course approval forms	-	1	10	-	-
Student charter	-	-	7	-	3
Student satisfaction surveys	-	3	5	1	1
Assessment procedures	-	4	6	-	-
Library and IT access policy	1	4	6	-	-
Annual course review procedure	-	-	11	-	-
Periodic course review procedure	-	-	11	-	-
Audit trial	-	1	10	-	-
Student complain procedure	-	-	10	-	1
Teacher review groups	1	-	-	-	-
Usage data analysis	1	-	-	-	-

Analysis of results

In terms of type of provision, fully online modules and courses are provided by half of the universities (6) at undergraduate level; almost half (5) also offered this provision at postgraduate level and only a few offered this modality in CPD modules. The case of mixed-mode modules or courses is different. In this case, most of the universities (9) had this type of delivery at postgraduate level; half of them also offered it at undergraduate level (with more modules than complete courses in this mode of delivery) and fewer on CPD modules and courses. Combining both categories of type and level of modules and/or courses that universities provided, only one university was offering fully online and mixed-mode modules and complete courses in the three different levels (undergraduate, postgraduate and CPD). From these figures, the picture that emerges is that dual-mode universities would tend to provide more mixed-mode courses and modules than fully online ones, and that most of this provision is at postgraduate level.

Regarding the relationship between modules and full courses, the results show that only one institution claimed to be offering a fully online module with not one complete course in the same modality (at CPD level). The results for mixed-mode delivery are different. In this case, four universities reported having modules in this modality (at various levels) with no corresponding complete courses for the same level. This might indicate that the design and delivery of fully online modules was almost always part of a complete course delivered in that modality, while mixed-mode delivery was used also in a complementary way to face-to-face teaching and learning; this may also explain the fact that some universities presented no complete courses delivered in mixed-mode.

Questions 3 and 4 (Q3, Q4 above) were intended to uncover whether institutions had already set up any specific procedures or developed any specific documentation to assure the quality of online and mixed mode delivery. Only four universities indicated having specific procedures, and three also had documentation. This shows that the majority of universities had not yet addressed this issue in a formal way.

A more detailed review on how these institutions were addressing the quality assurance issue for online provision can be gathered from the answers to question 5 (Q5). According to these results and corroborating the responses on the two previous questions, most institutions were usually applying the same procedures and documentation for online courses as for campus-based courses. The only case in which a different procedure was in place was for Library and IT access policy.

Supplementary procedures and documentation for online provision were more frequently found. Half of the institutions stated they had supplemental procedures for online Course/Module Design. Also, in the areas of Assessment procedures and Library and IT access policy, four universities indicated they had special proceedings. The student satisfaction survey was also a process on which additional components for online provision was found in four institutions (one of which was under development).

The areas of quality assurance in which none of the institutions had any special or supplementary procedures or documentation were: annual course review, periodic course review and student complaints procedures.

The final question of the questionnaire (Q7) requested additional information that could help understand the way institutions were addressing the quality assurance of online courses. Their answers show that institutions were basically using the same procedures and documentation, but special consideration and attention were given when an online course was under review. One respondent was explicit in stating that quality assurance may be different for online courses in their implementation, 'but the principles are the same' as for campus-based courses.

When comparing these final comments with the responses provided in question five (Q5), an interesting counterpoint can be observed. Reviewing the explanations given by universities regarding their own quality assurance systems, their arguments were in support of the position that there is no need for special arrangements for the quality assurance of online courses; or that at least the principles should remain the same as for campus-based courses. However, looking at the answers to question five, while the majority of institutions were using the same procedures and documentation for both types of courses, there was a significant number of institutions that already had specially formulated procedures for online and mixed-mode courses. Supplementary procedures and documents for course and module design, assessment procedure and library and IT access policy are some examples of the special arrangements in place for online and mixed-mode courses.

Of the number of institutions that had specific or supplemental procedures, it is possible to distinguish that some quality assurance procedures (course and module design, library and IT access policy and assessment procedures) seemed to be more important for institutions to address earlier than others. It is also interesting to note that institutions were addressing the application of quality assurance to online courses mostly through supplemental documentation rather than with completely different procedures.

It is possible to identify some trends in the responses collected that can be summarised in three main points presented below. These results, of course, only apply to the sample, and the small sample size does not allow any generalisation about the way in which higher education institutions are addressing the quality assurance of online and mixed-mode provision in the wider context.

- Dual-mode higher education institutions tended to provide more mixed-mode courses than fully online courses, and these were mostly at postgraduate level.

- Institutions seemed to support the position that quality assurance procedures needed to be revised for their application to online courses. A frequent result of this revision was the development of supplementary procedures and documents which were specifically oriented to cover online and mixed-mode courses.

- Based on the number of institutions that presented different or supplementary procedures and documents, those that seemed to be of more relevance for them, in terms of priority, were: course/module design, assessment procedures, library and IT access policy, student satisfaction survey, and course/module approval procedure and forms. In contrast, those procedures which were not mentioned as being under revision at that moment or in the future were: student charter, annual reviews, periodic reviews, and student complaints mechanisms.

Overall, these results show that some higher education institutions were starting to address this issue based on the assumption that a different or at least an adapted version of the quality assurance procedures was required for online courses. The question that arises from these findings is how institutions should or could approach the modification or adaptation of their quality assurance procedures, taking into account the differences between the two modalities of provision. And furthermore, whether all procedures actually need to be modified or adapted in order to be effective for online programmes.

Framing these questions in the context of dual-mode institutions which already have procedures for the quality assurance of their face-to-face courses, a first step would be to examine the quality assurance procedures currently in place for campus-based courses to analyse whether their set up would allow them to be applied to online courses.

Approaching the current quality assurance procedures in terms of their general objectives, as defined by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2002b), they aim to:

- assure that quality standards are attained by courses
- assure that the courses achieve their stated aims
- assure that students are attaining the intended learning outcomes
- identify whether the aims and intended learning outcomes set for a course are still valid
- plan remedial actions when weak aspects of a course are identified.

Considering the above list of aims, the same purposes for the quality assurance of online learning courses could be defined. The tension seems to lie consequently on the application of the procedures rather than on their purposes. Two initial questions arise regarding their applicability to online courses:

- Are the procedures already set up for face-to-face courses suitable for the online modality?
- If not, where are the tensions between the two modes of delivery (for course staff and institutions)?

To approach these questions, a deeper understanding of how quality assurance procedures for face-to-face provision operate in higher education institutions was required. In order to get a closer view of how the procedures operated, a brief review of practice was carried out, aiming to identify the purposes for which institutions apply their quality assurance mechanisms and the main issues that lie behind the procedures; the review would also provide further insight about how the procedures may be approached in this research project.

Exploring quality assurance practice

To understand how quality assurance mechanisms operate and how staff in higher education institutions encounter them, exploratory interviews were conducted to study in more detail how the procedures work and how they are applied in face-to-face and online courses.

The purposes of these exploratory interviews were:

- To understand how quality assurance procedures are applied and understood at an institutional level by the people in charge of their application.

- To understand how face-to-face and online course leaders come into contact with quality assurance procedures.
- To identify the main issues that lie behind quality assurance procedures, in terms of the key aspects of quality to be evaluated in a course.

One further purpose of these interviews was to identify the main issues involved in the application of quality assurance procedures within higher education institutions that would facilitate the refinement of the research questions and the design of the methodology for this project.

To achieve these goals, this exploratory study was designed as a set of interviews with people directly involved in the application of quality assurance procedures within higher education institutions, covering different levels, from senior management to course level. The decision to use face-to-face interviews was mainly in response to a consideration of the goals defined for this exploratory study. As the aims were to get an in-depth understanding of the way quality assurance procedures were applied and experienced in higher education institutions, the most important aspect of which data collection method to select was its flexibility to explore the interviewees' experience and opinions in detail. The interviews were selected to provide an improved understanding of the processes, and in that sense any other alternative method, such as questionnaires, would have limited the flexibility to pursue particular or unexpected aspects that may emerge during the interviews. The decision to carry out individual rather than group interviews was made based on the fact that interviewees were to be selected from different institutions which would have made the interviews difficult to set up. Additionally, individual interviews would facilitate a detailed exploration of the specific quality assurance procedures at each interviewee's institution, and from the particular point of view of each interviewee's position.

To select the interviewees, four key roles were identified: Quality Assurance officer, usually in charge of the overall internal quality assurance management within an institution, the director/leader of a face-to-face course, the director/leader of an online course, and a school/department-level quality assurance coordinator.

Following the advice provided by Brown and Dowling (1998), the interviews were designed to get the maximum benefit from the information that interviewees would be able to provide. Each of them was interviewed individually, following a semi-structured design. A question guideline was created to collect a similar range of data from each interviewee that

would allow later comparison of the answers. The interviews however were semi-structured to give space to the interviewees to report their own experience regarding the application of quality assurance procedures in more detail; and also to make it possible to include further questions if information about an interesting experience or material came out during the conversation. In the same way, questions were designed and presented in a semi-structured way, giving interviewees the freedom to answer in comfort and in their own style (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

The selection of the interviewees was done based on ease of access of the different roles defined. The institutions to which the interviewees belonged were not necessarily dual-mode. Considering that the goal at this stage was only to get a deeper insight into the purposes of the quality assurance procedures and how they were experienced, there was no requirement for the interviewees to be part of a dual-mode institution.

The interviews were designed following the BERA ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004), including at the beginning a fairly detailed explanation of the purposes of both the research project and the exploratory interviews, how the interviewees were selected and clarifying that all information provided during the interview would be kept anonymous and confidential. With the permission of interviewees, the complete conversations were recorded for the purpose of later transcription and analysis.

All interviews were conducted by the author of this research, who contacted participants by e-mail explaining the main purpose of the interview and the type of information it sought to gather. The interviews were carried out with those who agreed to be interviewed at a time and place of their choosing.[3]

The interviews observed the following sequence:

1. Introduction, during which the researcher introduced herself to the interviewee, explained the purpose of the research and specifically of the exploratory study; explained why s/he was selected; gave assurance of anonymity and confidentiality of responses; and asked for permission to record the interview.

2. Main body of interview, which followed the guidelines according to the interviewee's role (see Appendix Two). These guidelines included specific questions around five

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[3] All interviews were carried out during April and May 2004

points, which constituted the common content structure of all interviews. These were:

- Main functions and purposes of the quality assurance procedures
- Internal attitudes (of academic staff) towards quality assurance procedures
- Perception of differences between the functions of the quality assurance procedures (assuring vs. enhancing quality)
- Efficiency of the current procedures in place in their institutions
- Key aspects of quality in a course

3. Close.

All interviewees presented a very positive attitude towards the topic of the interview. They seemed relaxed and did not demonstrate any apprehension in answering any of the questions presented. Each interview lasted around one hour. The recordings were downloaded into a personal computer and password protected.

Overview of issues revealed in the exploratory interviews

The overall goals of the interviews were to better understand how procedures were perceived and used by different staff roles within an institution, and to get an overview of their implementation. It is possible to suggest that these goals were largely achieved despite this exploration including a very limited number of interviews. The interviewees provided an interesting and open range of views on how quality assurance procedures were being approached by themselves, and by staff in general in their particular institutions.

As defined in the interview guidelines, the conversations focused on five main topics: the functions of the quality assurance procedures; staff attitudes towards the procedures; the distinctions they may be making between procedures for assuring and procedures for enhancing quality; their perception of the efficiency of the procedures, and their views on what they considered to be the key aspects of quality in a course.

In terms of the functions that the procedures for quality assurance had within each institution, the interviewees presented a fairly similar understanding of their purposes. Mainly they exist a) to assure the quality of a course, and its correspondence with the institutional strategic objectives; and b) to gather evidence that would provide the basis for decision making, to implement changes and to support requests for more resources.

According to the interviewees, academic staff mostly had a positive attitude towards the procedures. They all acknowledged however the existence within their own institutions of a recognisable group that had a detached or negative attitude towards the implementation of the quality assurance mechanisms. This negative stance –referred to as 'the people who do not take it seriously' – was mainly revealed by their lack of responsibility in completing the tasks that the procedures demanded, such as the generation of reports.

It was suggested that the primary explanation for this negative attitude was an overload of work, preventing academic staff from giving sufficient time to an activity they perceive as not having any (positive or negative) consequence for them. A secondary reason given by interviewees – which was also recognised as causing a negative attitude – was an explicit disapproval that was expresses by some academic staff of these mechanisms. This latter attitude was mentioned by one interviewee as being particularly important in one institution which was described as having a strong departmental identity and where any external intervention – including college-wide procedures – was perceived as an intrusion.

Interestingly, interviewees indicated that the basis for a negative attitude among staff was largely related to a lack of understanding of the direct benefits that the application of the procedures would have for them as academics. They indicated however that staff were concerned with delivering high quality in their day-to-day activities, but the problem emerged with the application of formal procedures. This attitude highlights the problem that although staff may be well-intentioned and concerned with high quality, this does not prove that high quality has been achieved.

It was surprising to find that one interviewee, a course leader, was not aware of the procedures in place in his institution. According to him, there was no mechanism that had to be applied, and within his course team, they were not using the term quality assurance in their daily work; however they did have an innovative set of mechanisms in place to assure and improve the quality of their course.

Regarding the distinction between assuring and enhancing quality there was agreement among interviewees that quality assurance procedures, in their experience, were mostly focused on assuring rather than enhancing quality. Nevertheless, some recognised that when student perceptions and experiences were included, there were more chances of enhancement. They also noted that the procedures that included not only an evaluation, but the definition of an action plan tended to facilitate future improvements.

None of the interviewees who were applying quality assurance procedures could deny the effectiveness of these mechanisms. They seemed to agree that the mechanisms in place in their institutions were fine, with regard to how they operated and their purposes, although they recognised that there was room for improvement. One aspect highlighted by some of the interviewees was the fact that it is not completely possible to assess the effectiveness when the mechanisms are not fulfilled to the same depth and thoroughness and/or not all are carried out by staff. For example, in one institution fewer than half of the staff had gone through peer observation in the previous year. In their personal views however, quality assurance procedures presented the necessary features to be effective.

Finally, in relation to the aspects of quality of a course, interviewees interestingly agreed on the range of aspects considered to be key quality factors: teaching staff, teaching and learning activities, assessment, support and resources. These same aspects were mentioned for online courses.

Overall interviewees presented a rather similar view on how quality assurance procedures were operating within their own institutions, regardless of their different roles and positions. From their responses it is possible to build up the general view that quality assurance procedures are in place and working as much as staff time allows; staff are aware of their importance although sometimes it is difficult to make them realise the direct benefits for their own course-related activities; and that quality assurance procedures are in general perceived as a top-down imposition, mainly focused on assuring rather than enhancing the quality of the courses.

Issues arising from the different modes of course delivery

From the analysis of the interviews, several issues were identified as presenting potential tensions when applied to a different mode of teaching and learning.

There was a wide range of quality assurance mechanisms in place in the institutions where the interviewees were located. Course approvals, annual course reviews, module evaluations, student feedback surveys, and external examiners are examples of procedures common to all of them. The ways in which these mechanisms were applied however varied considerably in the different institutions.

One first issue that emerges from the way procedures were implemented is related to the

ease of access to information. Considering that the procedures had been designed for face-to-face courses, they all relied completely on the availability for inspection of the modality of delivery, for example, on the possibility of talking face-to-face with students for module evaluations, or directly observing classes when implementing peer observations.

In this sense the different modalities of delivery vary in the extent to which they are available for inspection. At one end, the face-to-face modality allows direct class observations and direct contact with students. At the other end, distance learning courses can only be reviewed through their materials, which convey all the aspects of the course (teaching style, learning activities, assessment, resources, etc.). The online modality could be positioned in-between the two. In some aspects online courses could be as closed as they are for traditional distance learning since students are remotely located and some of the resources might be delivered through printed materials. But at the same time, online courses provide communication between tutors and students, and among students, through conferencing and discussion spaces which could be observed directly.

As discussed in the previous chapter, this variation of availability for inspection has implications for the applicability of the procedures to the different modalities of delivery (CVCP, 2000). From the interviews it is possible to suggest that the quality assurance procedures that were already in place for face-to-face provision seemed to be unsuitable for online or mixed-mode courses, unless some adaptation for their correct implementation were to be carried out. Furthermore, it seems that information gathered through the application of the procedures may be of a different nature. In other words, the necessary information to be gathered from an online discussion with students about the quality of a module would be of a different type to the information gathered from a face-to-face conversation or a print-based questionnaire.

The different quality assurance procedures that would be needed for this new mode of delivery raise a second issue, this time related to where the responsibility for the quality assurance lies. From the interviews it was observed that in face to face courses it is the leader or director of the programme who holds the clear responsibility for carrying out the design and delivery, and therefore the quality of the course relies directly on him/her. In distance and online learning there is usually a distribution of tasks for the design and delivery across different units within an institution, sometimes including external providers. These observations corroborate the first distinctive feature of e-learning discussed in the previous chapter (Harvey, 2002), where the disaggregated structure of online courses poses

an organisational challenge to quality assurance, demanding that course teams define where responsibilities would lie before applying any procedures.

A third issue that arose from the interviews was the equivalence between face-to-face and distance/online qualifications, particularly when one course has two versions in different modes of delivery. According to some interviewees the aim was to keep this equivalence as much as possible, for example, keeping the same standards by using the same external examiners and/or applying the same assessment strategies. The question that may be presented here is whether it is possible to keep such equivalence. The answer to this question may be very different depending on whether equivalence of a qualification is only taking into account the way students are assessed or if it also considers the student learning experience. Furthermore, a second question might be to what extent it is relevant to the quality of a course to keep this equivalence.

When equivalence is only considered from the assessment point of view, i.e. two programmes are delivered by different modalities – online and face-to-face – but have the same assessment method and procedures, the awards granted can be considered equivalent. Problems may appear when the aim is to offer courses by different modes of delivery with equivalent students' learning experiences. Research comparing both modes of delivery has mainly focused on evaluating students' outcomes, and the evidence seems to support the argument that there would 'not be a significant difference' between the different modes of delivery (Russell, 1999). Although the quality of this type of research has been put into question (Phipps and Merisotis, 1999), it would not be possible to suggest that one modality is more effective than the other in terms of the quality of students' outcomes.

It could be argued that the nature of the learning activities may provide a different learning experience for students, without attempting to contend that one mode of delivery is better than the other, and recognising that both modalities can deliver similar student outcomes. However, an equality issue could arise if a comparison of the two modalities is expected to be made using the same indicators. For example, if the quality of a course is measured by the interaction time students spend with tutors, the assumption that online students would be at a disadvantaged position by being at a distance would not be fair, as the position from which this assumption emerges ('face-to-face is better') is pre-judged. In this sense, making such a comparison between the modalities does not seem appropriate. The resulting implications for quality assurance are related to the purposes of the procedures, which are focused on establishing the quality of the programme and enhancing the quality of the

course itself rather than in its comparison with a face-to-face version.

Refining the research problem and research question

The results obtained from these two exploratory studies provided further insight into how current quality assurance procedures were being implemented in higher education institutions, giving the view of a rather robust system, mostly focused on assuring rather enhancing quality. It also highlighted problems related to staff time and in some cases their lack of understanding of the direct benefits for their activities. The exploratory studies also enabled a more detailed examination of some of the online learning aspects that may be affecting the application of these procedures, and hence may contribute to the refinement of the research questions. Three main issues were identified: availability for inspection, responsibility for quality, and equivalence of qualifications, which were all considered important aspects of the online modality that need to be taken into account when applying quality assurance procedures.

These issues corroborate the fact that, in practice, some of the distinctive features of e-learning identified in the literature and presented in previous chapters are a real concern for practitioners in the application of the quality assurance procedures to online courses. The results also point towards the need to understand in more detail the ways in which these procedures could be modified or adapted in order to take into account the online modality.

Having previously framed the research question as how dual-mode universities approach the assurance of quality of their online courses, the issues identified in the data gathered in the exploratory studies give rise to a refined definition of the problem, the object of the study and the research questions for this enquiry.

Therefore, the primary aim of this research project is to explore the ways in which dual-mode universities approach the application of quality assurance procedures in their online and mixed-mode courses and to identify whether through the application of these procedures they are able to assure and enhance their quality effectively, taking into account the differences imposed by the modality.

Rephrasing this aim as a research question, the focus of this enquiry is to answer:

- Are quality assurance procedures used by dual-mode universities to ensure and enhance the quality of their online and mixed-mode courses effective?

Assuming the analysis will result in finding aspects of online courses that are not being captured by current quality assurance procedures, three specific research questions will then be addressed:

- Which features of the online modality influence the capacity of the quality assurance procedures to capture the quality aspects of courses?
- What do team members do to assure and enhance the quality of the online course?
- What are the components in an online course that cannot be regarded as equivalent to the ones present in a face-to-face course?

To get an understanding of how dual-mode universities approach this task involves investigating in what ways and to what extent current quality assurance procedures are appropriate for the online modality. Understanding 'appropriateness' of the quality assurance procedures as the level of effectiveness with which the procedures are able to capture all the aspects of a course, the first step to responding to the research question would be to identify whether these procedures are able to capture all aspects of online courses. The identification of these 'gaps' would then make it possible to explore the ways in which the quality assurance procedures could be adapted to improve their effectiveness.

Conclusions

This chapter presented two exploratory studies carried out in the early stages of this research project. The results gathered have provided better insight to the area of research and have facilitated the delimitation and refinement of the research questions for this enquiry.

Additionally, these exploratory studies revealed that the distinctive features of e-learning are a real concern for practitioners, hence the need to gain further understanding of the ways in which quality assurance mechanisms may be modified to make them fully effective for the assurance and enhancement of quality of online learning courses.

In the next chapter the methodology to carry out the investigation and eventually to respond to the research question is presented and discussed.

Chapter Four

Methodology

The aim of this research project was to understand how dual-mode universities are approaching the application of the quality assurance procedures to their online courses in order to assure and enhance their quality effectively. To respond to this question, the research methodology described in this chapter aimed to identify whether the quality assurance procedures already in place in these institutions were able to capture the aspects that characterise online courses.

To carry out this analysis, a multiple-case study approach was selected as the most appropriate strategy that would allow a deep examination of the quality assurance procedures as well as the features of the courses under study, whilst keeping the connection with their institutional context.

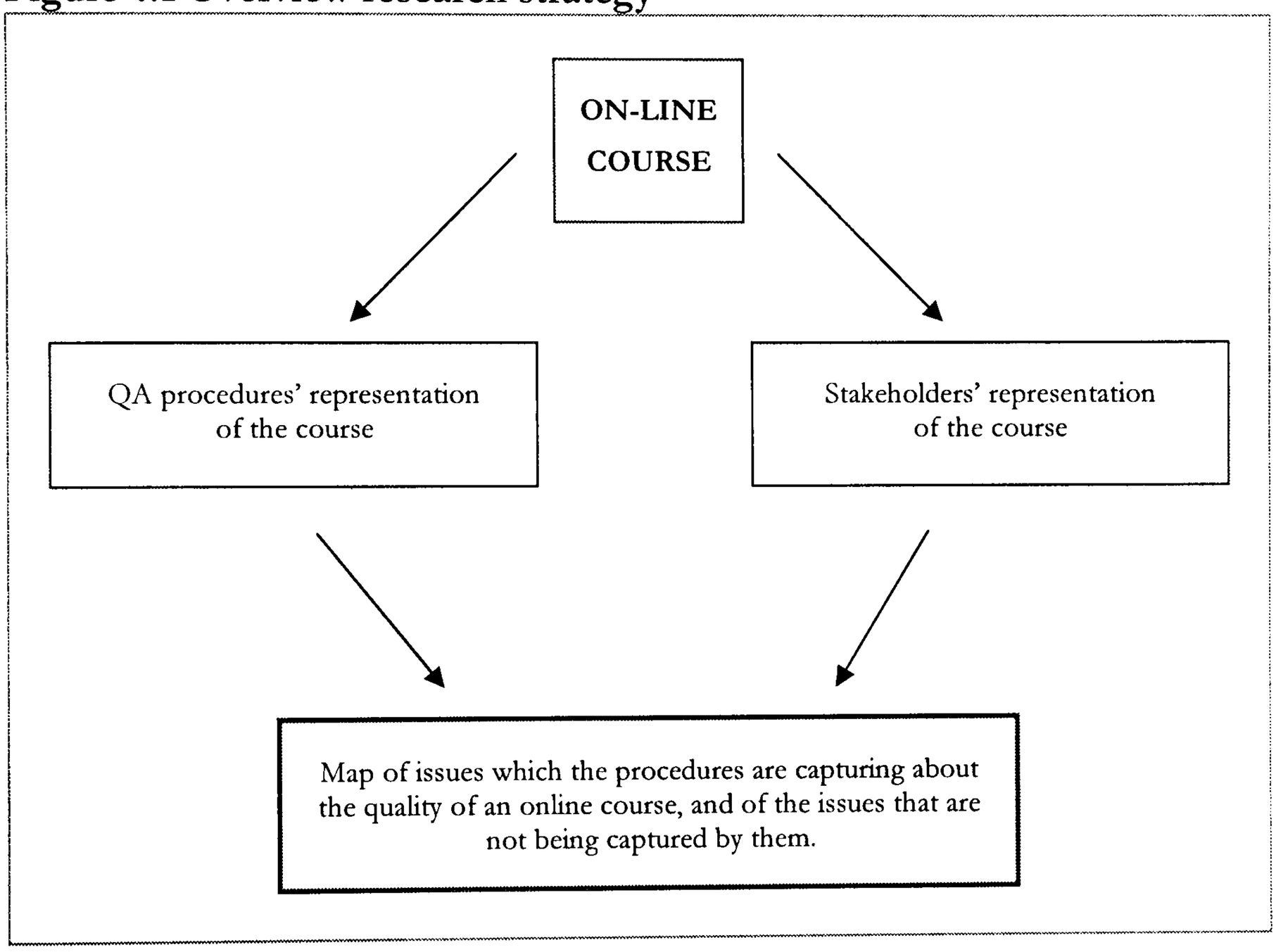
Research strategy

Investigating the way dual-mode universities approach an effective application of the quality assurance procedures in their online courses implies exploring current procedures to identify their capacity to capture the quality aspects of an online course. To this end, it was necessary to get access to two main sources of data, in order to produce a map of the aspects of online courses which were being captured by the quality assurance procedures, and also to identify the aspects which were not being captured by them (represented in Figure 4.1). On the one hand, to identify the aspects of quality that these procedures were able to capture in an online course, it was essential to analyse the quality assurance documentation related to an online course. The application of quality assurance procedures involves the generation of several types of documentation, which – it could be assumed – contain and reveal the aspects being considered, and hence provide the required evidence to determine the aspects of an online course which are captured by the procedures. This documentation can take the form of student survey results, annual course review reports, and external examiners' reports, staff meetings' minutes, among others.

On the other hand, the most direct way to identify the aspects which were not being

captured by the quality assurance procedures was through the views of the stakeholders on the course. Assuming that the account that stakeholders are able to give could be considered as the most complete description possible to obtain of a course, establishing their views provided the necessary contrasting point to identify the aspects which were not being captured by the quality assurance procedures. To obtain the stakeholders' view of the course, it was necessary to approach academic staff, students, support staff, developers, among others.

Figure 4.1 Overview research strategy



The analysis of the data focused on identifying the aspects that were not being captured by the quality assurance procedures. Particular attention was given to those aspects that were related to the issues recognised on the exploratory studies as having an impact on the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures, namely availability for inspection, responsibility for quality and equivalence of qualifications.

It is relevant to highlight here the institutional point of view from which this research started. The aim of this research was to provide insight into the institutional challenge that online provision entails for quality assurance management. So it is important to clarify that the definition of quality standards for online provision or the definition of how quality should be maintained and enhanced by course teams (in the form of practical guides of

what constitutes a good quality online course, or good practice advice) were not part of this project.

As suggested earlier, this study is focused on describing and analysing a particular event within dual-mode higher education institutions, that is the application of quality assurance procedures to online courses, aiming to identify the extent of their effectiveness for assuring and enhancing quality. The first step in this research involved the comparative analysis of two sets of data which were expected to provide the evidence that would enable the question to be answered. However, the analysis of these datasets required maintaining consideration of the institutional context within which the courses were delivered. Additionally, both datasets needed to belong to the same online course as this is a comparative analysis aiming to identify the gaps between the sets of data.

Considering the above, a case study approach seemed to be the appropriate strategy to answer the question defined for this research. According to Yin's (2003) analysis for the selection of research strategies, case studies would be the most pertinent when three conditions are present: 'when a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control' (Yin, 2003: 9). This enquiry matched all three conditions in this definition. Additionally it included multiple sources of data. Adopting a case study approach also allowed other aspects to be taken into consideration, such as the particular conditions of the institution, the course team, and the programme of study, which may have been affecting the way in which the quality assurance procedures were applied, and hence influencing the results of the analysis. In terms of the type of case study to be carried out, Bassey's (1999) describes three main types of case study research: theory-seeking and theory-testing, which are particular studies of general issues, where the focus is on the issue rather than on the case as such; story-telling and picture-drawing case studies are mainly analytic accounts of events that aim to illuminate or develop theory; and evaluative case studies, which explore some programme, system or event in order to focus on its 'worthwhileleness'. Based on these definitions, the latter category, evaluative case study, seems to match the present research concerns, as it aims to examine the extent to which the quality assurance procedures in place in dual-mode higher education institutions are effective for online and mixed courses.

The methodology designed for this project follows the guidelines provided by Yin (2003), who defined a case study as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between

phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin, 2003: 13).

This case study research approach was based on qualitative methods for the collection and analysis of data. The use of quantitative data was used only as a supplementary tool to review the data collected in the documents and interviews (quantification of the characters coded under each category) to identify possible patterns or trends (Flick, 2006).

Research design

Case studies require a detailed design to ensure the research questions are logically and appropriately approached, the correct data gathered and a strategy for the analysis developed.

Yin (2003) suggests that for the definition of what would constitute a 'case', the particular aspects that will be investigated within each case – which he calls, the 'unit of analysis' – should also be specified, and that all of these should be defined in accordance with the research question. A 'case' in this inquiry has been defined as an online course that belongs to a dual-mode higher education institution in England. In other words, in order to qualify as a case study for this inquiry, an online course had to be part of the academic offer of a dual-mode higher education institution in England, and should have had quality assurance procedures applied to it.

Specifically, the aspects to be investigated within each 'case' were the quality assurance processes and procedures in place in the institution and applied to the specific course under study, including the documentation that such processes and procedures leave as trails, and the people involved in the course design, delivery and evaluation.

The data to be gathered from each case study come from two main sources:

- Documents, comprising all the quality assurance procedures documentation that were available. These documents may include: student satisfaction survey results and reports; annual course review reports; course approval documentation; external examiners' reports; team meetings minutes; board and committee meetings minutes; and any other quality assurance documentation that the specific institutions applied to their courses and that were accessible.
- Stakeholders, including academic staff, tutors, administrators, students, support staff

(technical and other) and developers/designers. The method used to collect the data from stakeholders was a face-to-face interview. This method of collecting their views introduced a further challenge for this research design. As the case studies were online courses, most of the stakeholders – the students and some staff members – were located at a distance. An alternative method would have been to collect this data through a questionnaire or a written interview through e-mail; however, the exploratory nature of this research required more flexibility for collecting the stakeholders' views. Interviews

> allowed the collection of data based on a predefined structure, whilst giving space to focus on greater detail in some aspects if this was considered appropriate (Brown and Dowling, 1998).

Additionally basic information about each case study was collected to provide an overview of the characteristics of the course and its institutional context. These included: institution-wide quality assurance policy documents; course definition documents; course materials (manuals, audiovisual, computer supported materials, etc.); course statistics (number of students, tutors, students' achievements, etc.); and computer logs and statistics.

Based on the research design, and its aims, it seemed appropriate for this project to include more than one case study as a way to cover different contexts of dual-mode institutions, online courses and quality assurance procedures in place. The selection of the case studies followed a 'replication logic' (Yin, 1993) (as opposed to a sampling logic) which means that the case studies were selected to facilitate the replication of the study in other contexts, and in this way, make the results more robust. Considering the amount of data to be collected from each case study, and the aim to explore each case study in depth including their institutional context, only a small number of cases could be selected. Consequently, it was estimated that the inclusion of four case studies would be sufficient to cover a variety of contexts and course features, as well as providing a sufficient amount of data to allow a moderate level of generalisation of the research findings. In defining the number of case studies, the limited time available for carrying out this project was also considered.

Quality assurance documents

The first set of data for this research included the documentation associated with the quality assurance procedures applied to the courses that constituted the cases of study. These documents were expected to be found in the form of reports written by academic

staff, administrators or other contributors to the processes of applying quality assurance procedures.

In defining the process of seeking out and analysing these documents, the first step was to verify the authenticity, reliability of the documents and to what extent they were representative (Scott, 1990; May, 2001; McCulloch, 2004).

The verification of authenticity included the establishment of the author, place and date of writing of the documents, to check whether the versions found were correct and complete. In the case of the documents gathered for this research project, authenticity was not expected to cause a problem where reports had been held by the appropriate institutional quality assurance authority. Nevertheless, it may have become problematic if they had not been correctly filed. To minimise this problem, the intension was to collect the documents, where possible, from the institutions' quality assurance authorities (committees, officers, etc.). This would help to avoid (as much as possible), any inconsistencies in their content or versions.

Reliability was a more complex issue. McCulloch (2004) defines it as 'to define how far its [of the document] account can be relied on', that would include issues of truth and bias, availability of relevant source material and how representative the documents are (McCulloch, 2004: 42). In the analysis of the documents to be collected, the most complex of these issues was the fact that most likely it was not going to be possible to establish an individual author of many of the documents, as they might have been the result of collective authoring. Additionally, in these cases, it would not be possible to determine whether the writer was in the position to write the report and to be totally trusted, though external examiners' reports have a particular status in this regard. Nevertheless, considering that reports are generally understood as the final statement and representation of a process or events, the backing of a report by an authority with formal responsibility for the specific task – for example by the Academic Board, or the Quality Assurance Committee – was considered to be sufficient evidence of its trustworthiness.

To be representative, a minimum set of documentation for each case study needed to be included in order to qualify. Although this threshold was difficult to define from the outset, each case study needed to include an equivalent set of documentation in order to be comparable.

Once these criteria have been verified and accepted, the analysis of the meaning of the

documents started. According to McCulloch (2004) the meaning of a document concerns two aspects. The first is the literal meaning, i.e. making sure that the content of the document is clear, including the understanding of technical or specialised words or phrases and references to institutions or individuals. In the case of the documents to be analysed in this enquiry, it was expected that each case may have had particular ways of naming procedures and processes according to their own institutional conventions. The complementary documentation collected from each case, such as the quality assurance policy for each institution, provided the necessary context for understanding the detailed meaning of the main documents.

The second aspect is the interpretative meaning or theorisations (Scott, 1990; McCulloch, 2004). At this level of analysis, three main theoretical traditions are recognised. Jupp and Norris (1993) describe them as 'positivist', 'interpretative' and 'critical'. The main difference between them is the theoretical stand from which each tradition conceptualises the documents. Positivists understand social phenomena as being objective and independent from individuals. Accordingly, the analysis of documents is approached mainly using a content analysis strategy. The interpretative tradition, in contrast to positivism, is based on the understanding that social phenomena are essentially not objective but socially constructed by individuals (Jupp and Norris, 1993). In this way, the focus is on situated interpretations of documents, with an emphasis on hermeneutics and where semiotics is one of its well-known analytic strategies (Scott, 1990; Lee, 2000; May, 2001). Finally, the critical tradition is strongly theoretical and political, focusing on social structures, power, ideology and social conflict. In this tradition we find, for example, feminist theory and critical modes of discourse analysis (McCulloch, 2004).

Taking the research question defined for this enquiry as a starting point, it seemed clear that the documents themselves should be analysed following a positivist approach for the most part. However, the context in which they were produced also needed to be considered, as the documentation was to be relevant not only for the information it contained, but also for what was omitted (May, 2001).

The analysis of the documents of each case study would have two angles: on the one hand, it would provide a map of quality issues that were being captured by the quality assurance procedures in place. On the other hand, the analysis would also provide the picture of whether the issues captured by the procedures on the first stages of the application of the quality assurance process remained present throughout the stages.

The data resulting from the analysis of the documents was expected to be the map of aspects captured by the quality assurance procedures. The focus was to reveal the issues covered by the documents, and for that, it was necessary to code their text according to defined categories based on the quality assurance issues that the documents were expected to be covering.

Interview of stakeholders

The analysis of the quality assurance documentation was expected to give an overview of the issues being captured by the procedures in place in the institution where the courses under study were being run. In order to identify the issues which were not being captured by the procedures, a set of interviews was carried out with the course stakeholders.

As suggested in the previous section, the stakeholders' accounts are to be considered as the most complete description of the course that could possibly be obtained, and in this sense, the method for collecting their views became critical to the quality of the data. The aim of the interviews was to get the stakeholders' view of the course and its quality, providing the necessary contrasts for identifying the aspects which were not being captured by the quality assurance procedures.

Bearing in mind the research questions defined for this project, the interviews were focused on obtaining information related to two main issues:

- Further explanation of the issues which were not clear from the analysis of the quality assurance documentation.
- Stakeholders' views about the quality of the course under study and their personal role in maintaining and enhancing it.

The selection of the interviewees was carried out based on the different roles identified as stakeholders in an online course. The roles of the interviewees were:

- Academic staff and tutors
- Administrator(s)
- Students
- Support staff – technical and other (if different from the above)
- Developers/designer(s) (if different from the above)
- Employers

The interviews were carried out individually, following a semi-structured design to give space to interviewees to report their views of the quality of the course in their own style (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

The interviews were designed following the ethical guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004), including at the beginning a fairly detailed explanation of the purposes of the research and of the pilot study, and clarifying that all information given within the interview was to be kept anonymous and confidential. If interviewees permitted it, the conversation was going to be recorded for the purpose of later transcription and analysis.

All interviews were conducted by the author of this research. The first contact with the stakeholders was expected to be done through the course leader/director, with whom the conducting of the subsequent interviews would be agreed.

The analysis of the documentation for each case study would provide the necessary background for the preparation of the questions to ask in the interviews. The sequence of the questions to be asked was as follows:

1. Introduction
   - Personal introduction
   - Explanation of the purpose of the interview, and specifically the research of which it is a part.
   - Explanation why s/he was selected as interviewee
   - Assurance of anonymity and confidentiality of responses
   - Request for permission to record the interview
2. Main body of interview that would follow the guidelines according to each interviewee role and case study.
3. Close.

The comparative analysis of the results of the interviews against the results of the document analysis was expected to provide a map of the issues in each case study which were not being captured by the quality assurance procedures in place.

Data analysis

As presented above, the aim of the document analysis was to map out the aspects and quality issues that were being captured by the quality assurance procedures in place in an institution, and the extent to which they were being effectively captured. Also, the analysis aimed to provide a picture of whether the issues captured by the procedures in the first stages of the application of the mechanisms remained present until the final stages of the process. On the other hand, the analysis of the interviews aimed to identify the aspects and quality issues that were described by the stakeholders as representing their online courses. The results obtained from the analysis of the interviews were then to be compared with the results of the documents in order to get a map of the aspects which were mentioned by the interviewees and which were not present in the quality assurance documentation.

In order to carry out this comparison, the documents' texts and the interviews' transcriptions were coded using a list of categories in order to help identify and compare the different issues contained in both sets of data.

The coding process was carried out in two stages and utilised two complementary approaches. In the first process of coding, the texts would be coded using a 'start list' of codes (Miles and Huberman, 1994) created beforehand. The second process of coding would follow an inductive approach.

The first list of codes was defined based on the theoretical aspects of quality assurance taken from the literature. The starting point for creating this start list of codes, was the examination of the main quality assurance documents that higher education institutions are required to use when applying their internal procedures: the Quality Assurance Agency's Handbook for Academic Review (QAA, 2000c) and the relevant sections of the Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (QAA, 2000b; QAA, 2000a; QAA, 2004b; QAA, 2004a).

There was a four-step process to create the coding categories. Firstly, based on the Handbook for Academic Review (QAA, 2000c) and its description of the process of academic review, a detailed list of quality categories was generated. Secondly, a similar list was made from the sections of the Code of Practice (QAA, 2000b; QAA, 2000a; QAA, 2004b; QAA, 2004a). Thirdly, both lists were merged into one; and finally, the list was reduced to the minimum possible number of categories, with the occasional requirement to create new labels to group similar concepts. The result of this process was the start list of

codes presented in Table 4.1. In this list, three main aspects of quality were defined: standards of outcomes, learning opportunities and quality assurance procedures for enhancement. Each of these aspects opens up into several sub-sections. These categories are still at a general level.

Table 4.1 Start list of codes

Quality Assurance Aspects	General Categories	
STANDARDS OF OUTCOMES	Intended learning outcomes	
	Expectations	
	Curriculum	
	Assessment	
	Student achievement	
	Formative assessment	
	External examiners	
LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES	Teaching and learning	Student capacity
		Staff capacity
		Teaching methods
	Student support	Before the start of the course
		During delivery
		Students with disabilities
	Learning resources	Staff
		Facilities
		Delivery system
QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES for ENHANCEMENT	Quality Assurance procedures	

In order to carry out a consistent coding, clear operational definitions were devised for each of the codes, which are presented in Table 4.2. These definitions were based on the literature and the main quality assurance documents on which the creation of the start list of codes was based. These operational definitions were not intended to provide a definitive description of the quality assurance aspects, but rather to give a clear statement that would support and guide the coding of the texts under each category.

Although the coding of the texts at this stage was to be carried out according to these categories defined beforehand, it could also be the case that they might need to be expanded with categories that emerged from the documents themselves. This expansion was to be defined over the revision of the codes on completion of the first process.

Table 4.2 Operational definitions of codes

Intended learning outcomes	Refer to the intended learning goals and outcomes stated for the course; their relationship with subject benchmark statements, qualification framework, professional body requirements and with any other external reference point; to their relationship with internal reference points as aims and values of the institution. It also refers to the clarity, validity and relevance of learning outcomes statements.
Expectations	Refer to the explicit or implicit expectations regarding performance, participation, time commitment, pedagogic/academic requirements and responsibilities placed upon students and staff. It also refers to the ways in which these expectations are communicated to students, staff and external examiners.
Curriculum	Refers to curriculum content, design, components and structure; its relationship with learning outcomes; student options and flexibility within the given curriculum; to the clarity, currency and its relationship with other subjects/disciplines. It also refers to curriculum changes and updates.
Assessment	Refers to assessment structure, strategies and instruments of the course; to the criteria for assessing students; the clarity of assessment methods and criteria and how they are communicated to students, staff and external examiners; refers also to the assessment relationship with the stated learning outcomes and curriculum. It also refers to submission/examination and assessment process methods and rules; methods for informing results; and assessment misconduct and its consequences.
Student achievement	Refers to the level of achievement perceived/achieved by students; level of achievement in relation with the award; level of achievement in relation with assessment load and time to prepare. It also refers to assessment results.
Formative assessment	Refers to formative assessment in the form of formal and informal feedback to students like tutoring, supervision, draft coursework feedback; to the planning, organisation and schedule in the provision of formative assessment; to the timeliness, nature and extent of formative assessment; and to student progression monitoring arrangements.
External examiners	Refers to external examiners role and activities; and external examiner's reports.
Teaching and learning: Student capacity	Refers to student workload, participation and engagement in the learning activities.
Teaching and learning: Staff capacity	Refers to staff workload, participation and engagement in the teaching activities.

Teaching and learning: Teaching methods	Refer to the teaching and learning strategies, methods and learning activities.
Student support: Before the start of the course	Refers to the promotion and recruitment activities and materials; to the processes of admission and induction of students to the course; to the timeliness and form of the information provided to prospective students (or in the registration process)
Student support: During delivery	Refers to the administrative, technical, career guidance and library support for students during the delivering of the course.
Student support: Students with disabilities	Refers to accessibility and equality issues of materials, teaching strategies, information, support for students or any other aspect of the course.
Learning resources: Staff	Refers to staff experience, expertise and qualifications. It refers also to staff training activities.
Learning resources: Facilities	Refers to the facilities for teaching and learning, such as lecture rooms, library stock and access, IT equipment for staff and students; electronic resources. It also refers to the processes of delivery and reception of course materials.
Learning resources: Delivery system (VLE)	Refers to the delivery system (VLE, conferencing system, websites), its reliability, access, disruptions, problems, and backup systems.
Quality Assurance procedures	Refers to the procedures in place to maintain and enhance the quality and standards, through student, staff, stakeholders and alumni feedback; to the changes/modification of course content or structure; and complaints and appeals procedures and processes. It also includes the references to other similar internal or external courses.

Once the first process of coding was completed, a second stage of coding was expected to take place following an inductive approach (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Within each of the categories already coded, further refined coding was expected to be carried out, this time creating the codes from the data itself. In this second stage of coding, the codes to be created would be defined according to the content of the texts rather than being theoretically driven.

In the application of the coding to the texts, one additional step needed to be completed after coding the first set of data (the quality assurance documentation). Once the coding had been completed and revised, it would be possible to devise a map of the quality assurance issues that were present in the documentation. This map however would not provide any indications of the issues that were not being captured by the procedures. In order to get an initial idea of the issues which were missing from the documentation, and as an input for building up the interview guidelines, it would be necessary to contrast the issues identified in the coding process with the theoretical categories identified in the

literature. To this end, additional refined descriptors were created from the start list of codes (Table 4.1), and based on the same documents used to create those categories, as a way to provide theoretical indicators of the quality issues with which to contrast the issues found on the texts coded. This theoretical map is presented in Appendix Three.

Finally, there was an additional coding phase planned which aimed to identify the continuity of the quality issues across the documentation. The documents to be analysed represent, as was indicated earlier, the different stages of the quality assurance process within an institution. The aim of this last process of coding was to identify whether issues that appeared on the first stages of the quality assurance process remained present throughout the following stages or until they were solved. This additional coding phase could, of course, only take place if the documentation gathered from each case study was spread over a year or more, so that the issues could be traced across the documents.

Coding strategy

To manage the coding of the documents and interview transcripts, the process was carried out using the software package Nvivo, which offered a flexible tool for coding as it was created specifically for the analysis of texts. This software provided the facility to create categories ('nodes') before and during the coding process, which assisted both stages of the coding process described in the previous section.

Nvivo also provides a tool for managing coded texts by creating 'sets', allowing documents or nodes to be grouped and handled as single units; and 'case nodes' which are nodes organised into groups under specific attributes. These tools were expected to facilitate the follow-up of specific issues across different documents.

The unit of analysis for the coding of these texts was not predefined as structured sections such as words, lines or paragraphs. Not all of the text within a document was expected to be coded during the first stage of coding (based on the start list codes), as the documentation may have not related solely to the cases under study. As a consequence, only those sections of the documents that were directly related to the case studies were coded according to the categories defined. In the case of the interview transcripts, although it was expected that all their content was going to be directly related to the course under study, some sections were off-topic, and in these cases, they were not coded.

As an operational definition, the texts were coded according to the meaning of their content in relation to the operational definitions made for each code. The unit of analysis was defined as the syntactic structure which satisfied the description given for each coding category. In determining how large it was, one particular coding was applied until it was no longer valid. Therefore, a unit of analysis could be as short as a phrase and as long as several paragraphs.

It is important to consider the definition of the unit of analysis, as some initial numerical analysis of the coded texts was planned in order to detect whether any trends could be observed in the focus of the documents. Considering that the unit of analysis could be of different sizes, there was a risk in using it to make numerical comparisons. As an illustration, if a document is written in a way where its four topics are presented together, it would provide just four units of analysis. But if the same document is written in a way which presents the same content of the four topics distributed in alternate paragraphs, the result could possibly provide twenty or more units of analysis. To verify that the pattern of distribution of the topics in the documents collected in this study matched what the documents were representing, the data from the pilot and main studies were tested to verify its consistency.

This testing process was carried out by comparing the statistics (percentages in relation to the different types of documents) resulting from the counting of both the units of analysis coded under each category; and the numbers of characters coded under each category. The result of this comparison showed there were significant discrepancies in-between the statistics drawn from the two methods, which proved that the numerical interpretation based on the units of analysis was inappropriate. For this reason, the numeric analysis to be carried out in the pilot and main study is based on the percentage of characters coded under each category.

Validity and reliability

Bassey's (1999) defines reliability 'as the extent to which a research fact or finding can be repeated given the same circumstances' and validity as 'the extent to which a research fact is what it is claimed to be' (p. 75). In the context of case study research validity and reliability are however debated concepts because of their implications regarding generalisation (Brown and Dowling, 1998; Bassey, 1999).

It may well not be possible to assure the replication of the research processes used in this enquiry in other contexts. However, the specification of formal protocols for the collection and coding of the data (such as the interview guidelines and the operational definitions of the codes), and the use of specialised software to archive and manage the datasets (that would help in recreating the processes carried out in the analysis of the data) contribute to the reliability of the analysis and the results found in the case studies (Yin, 1993) because they would enable other researchers to follow the processes of this research in other situations.

Regarding the validity of the findings, case study research relies on the interpretation of the data by the researcher to establish their relationship to the research problem being investigated. This clearly presents limitations as the analysis is the result of an individual's interpretation rather than collectively derived. In the context of this research project, the validity of the results was pursued through the triangulation of the data: the use of multiple sources of data including documents and interviews, and the gathering of different perspectives from students, staff, administrators and designers, as well as through the clear definition of the unit of analysis (Bassey, 1999).

Ethical issues

This study was approved by the Institute of Education Standing Committee on Ethics in 2004, based on the submission of an account of ethical considerations guided by the ethical code of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004). Diverse ethical considerations were taken into account at the different stages of this research project.

Permission to use the online courses as case studies was obtained from the programme leaders, who accepted the invitation to participate after consultation with their teams. Their participation was voluntary and based on a detailed description of the purposes of this research project and the strategies and stages of data collection.

For the purpose of building up the collection of quality assurance documentation, course leaders were given a written a list of the documents expected to be collected, together with the assurance that documentation would be read only by the researcher and used solely for the purpose of this research project. Documents were mostly received as files sent by e-mail and in some cases saved on a CD. The documentation was saved in a personal computer, backed up for security reasons and password protected. Anonymity was

protected by the use of codes to label files and changing names of people and institutions within the documents.

Regarding the selection of the interviewees, different approaches were taken to protect stakeholders and assure their voluntary participation. In the case of staff (academics, administrators, designers) voluntary consent was obtained from each of them in the form of a response to a personalised invitation to be interviewed. This invitation explained the purposes of the research, the specific goals of the interview and the commitment of the researcher to anonymity and confidentiality pertaining to the information to be discussed during the interview.

In the case of students, a different approach was taken. Course leaders selected a group of students who could be interviewed face-to-face. The course leader would contact them directly, based on messages prepared by the researcher, where purposes and ethical issues were explained, asking them to contact the researcher if they were willing to be interviewed.

Each interview started by confirming the information provided in the invitation, explaining in more detail the purposes and goals of the interview in the context of the research, giving assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, as well as requesting explicit consent to record the conversation.

Anonymity was protected in the reporting of the study by the deletion of all real names (using fictitious names if required). The data gathered presented the potential risk of uncovering sensitive issues and information about courses or stakeholders and needed extreme confidentiality measures in their reporting. All delicate information was anonymised and described in a way to avoid the identification of institutions, courses and people.

The transcriptions of the interviews required particular ethical considerations. As the researcher had limited time to carry out this task, the service was done by an external company that provided the necessary measures regarding confidentiality (employees are required to sign non-disclosure agreements as part of their employment contract) and security (fire-walled servers in the UK, password protection, and encrypted transfers to and from the server) complying in this way with the Data Protection Act (HMSO, 1998). After the transcriptions were received, all were revised and corrected to verify accuracy.

Finally, during the process of data analysis, the researcher focused all effort on ensuring

that stakeholders' views were appropriately understood (through a thorough revision of codes applied to texts) and properly represented in the reporting process.

Conclusions

The aim of this research project was to understand how dual-mode universities approach the application of the quality assurance procedures to their online courses that would allow them to assure and enhance their quality effectively. To respond to this question, the research strategy was designed to identify whether the quality assurance procedures already in place in these institutions were able to capture – and to what extent – the aspects that characterise online courses. To carry out this analysis, a case study approach was selected as the most appropriate strategy that would allow a deep examination of the quality assurance procedures as well as the features of the courses under study, maintaining their connection with their institutional context.

Each case study would be investigated using two main sets of data; the quality assurance documentation and the stakeholders' views, and analysed through a comparative examination of their content. This analysis would be carried out regarding the theoretical aspects that quality assurance procedures should be capturing as defined in the literature and which have been structured as a set of categories under which the data would be coded. By structuring the analysis in this way it was expected that a map of the issues which are not being captured by the quality assurance procedures would be drawn up, and aspects of the courses which were affecting the implementation would be obtained.

The next chapter presents an account of the pilot carried out to test this methodology. The pilot study aimed to test the data collection methods and to identify the limitations of the data gathered for answering the research questions.

Chapter Five

Pilot Study

The aims of the pilot study were: to test the research methodology presented in the previous chapter to identify the type and range of data that it would be possible to gather through the methods selected; to establish the potential limitations of the data gathered; to trial the process of data-analysis to identify whether it would be possible to answer the research questions through it; and to modify and improve the data collection and analysis methods before applying them to the main case studies.

In the following sections, the course selected as a pilot, as well as the data gathered and analysed and the results obtained, are described and discussed in detail. As a result of the pilot carried out, some key changes were made to the methodology and the final version is presented at the end.

Case for the pilot study

The selection of the case for the pilot study was made based on three criteria. Firstly, the course had to comply with the conditions established in the research methodology. This definition required that a case could be an online or mixed-mode course, delivered by a dual-mode higher education institution and having been subject to quality assurance procedures. Secondly, it was important to avoid using a course that would be part of the main study. Thirdly, the ease of access to the course was the final consideration as that would facilitate the collection of the data.

The selected course was based in a higher education institution located in London. The course was delivered completely online using a computer conferencing system. The programme was a master's degree on which mostly international students were registered, along with some UK-based students. The course had an equivalent face-to-face version, and students registered on the distance/online version could take some campus-based modules; conversely, students registered on the face-to-face version of the course were allowed to take online modules during their studies.

The contact was the course leader who formally agreed to participate in the pilot study

after consultation with his course team. The request sent to the course leader gave an overview of the research aims and strategy, and also a list of the documentation and interviews that the methodology included. One relevant issue for the course leader in agreeing to participate was a clear definition of a confidentiality agreement in the use of the information requested. Following discussions, it was agreed that all individual names from interviews and documentation would be removed before processing began, and that the course leader would read and approve any account of the pilot study or part of it which was to be read by others.

Data for the pilot study: documents

The course administrator was the person designated to provide the documentation requested. The first set of data gathered for the pilot study comprised the following documentation organised by year and presented in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Summary of quality assurance documents collected – Pilot Study

	2001/2	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	Total
Course Proposal	1				1
Course Handbooks			1	1	2
Course Team Meeting Minutes	6	7	7		20
Annual Course Review Reports	1	1	1		3
External Examiner's Report	1	1	1		3
Module Evaluation Reports	1	3	4		8
Quality Committee Meeting Minutes	5	7	4		16
Total					53

Documentation in context

The documentation gathered for the pilot case study represented a fairly complete picture of the quality assurance procedures in place in the institution where the course was based.

The pilot course was delivered by a higher education institution that had a clear quality assurance and enhancement policy. The procedures in place in this institution at the level of programme were: course approval, annual course reviews, external examiners' reports, student representative, and student feedback mechanisms. In this course, student feedback

was gathered through a module evaluation form that students had to respond to at the end of each module; its results were collated in a report by the course administrator. The course had one external examiner who delivered a report once a year (filling out a form) based on the information provided by the course team. The annual course reviews were carried out by the course team based on the institutional guidelines and the information gathered throughout the year in their team meetings, plus the input from the student feedback forms and external examiners' reports. The course approval procedure only took place once, at the very start of the programme. For this procedure, it was only possible to obtain the original proposal submitted by the team.

There was an additional procedure at course level called a 'periodic review' which is applied to courses every five years to review the validity and currency of the programme. The course selected for this pilot study had been running for only three years, and so it had not been under periodic review.

According to the annual course review procedure in place in this institution, each course leader submits their annual course review report to their Head of Department through the department's Quality Assurance Committee. This committee reviews the reports and provides feedback to each course leader, and also feeds back to the Programme Board on issues which need to be addressed at an institutional level.

Based on this structure, quality assurance issues for a course are dealt with firstly by the course team in their regular meetings, where they receive reports from the module tutors and student representatives. Also, in these meetings, the course team reviews the collated report of the results of the module evaluation forms and the external examiner's report. The issues raised in these sessions should be managed in the team meetings and ultimately reported through the annual course review at the end of each academic year.

Accordingly, the documentation gathered for this pilot covered almost all the quality assurance procedure reports that were directly related to the course and the minutes of meetings where quality issues were raised, discussed and addressed. This extensive material was therefore a good representation of the quality assurance procedures of the course.

Process of coding

To proceed with the coding of the documentation, all fifty three documents were uploaded

into Nvivo, as well as the 'start list' of codes.

The process of coding the texts presented some difficulties in choosing the right category under which to code some of the sections. This difficulty in coding the texts was sometimes related to the fact that the seventeen codes (see Table 4.1) were taken as being at the same level, and hence decisions were mostly based on their operational definition (Table 4.2) which tended to be very similar in some cases. The most difficult cases were the categories of 'formative assessment' and 'expectations'. The latter was especially difficult, as most of the time the 'expectations' category was based on the way the text was written, while the content of the text was pointing to a different category. The first category, 'formative assessment', sometimes overlapped with other categories such as 'assessment' or 'staff capacity', or its content was mostly related to what could be categorised as 'student support during delivery'.

Taking these issues which were raised during the coding process, three key decisions were made. The first decision was to restructure the codes arrangement. The adjustments to the structure of the codes were focused on clarifying the choice of categories under which to code the texts. The types of changes were as follows:

- Renaming categories to make the process of coding easier. In this case the code 'Students with disabilities' was changed into 'Accessibility and equal opportunities issues'; and 'Formative assessment' was changed to 'Academic support'. The new names were chosen as they were a better representation of what the definition of the categories included, which facilitated the coding process.

- Dividing one category into two to make more consistent coding. This was the case with 'Expectations', which was divided into 'Expectations' and 'Student expectations'. The first new code 'Expectations' was positioned under the 'Course Definition' general category, and defined in its operational description only to those texts that refer to the expectations that the course (as an entity) has upon students and staff; 'Student expectations' on the other hand, was defined as referring to what students were expecting, and to what they finally got, from the course. This category was positioned under the 'Teaching and Learning' general category.

- Re-ordering the position of some codes in the main structure. This is the case of the code 'Student achievement' which was moved into the 'Teaching and Learning' general category; 'External examiners' was moved into the 'Quality assurance procedures'

general category; and 'Academic support' (formerly 'Formative assessment') was moved into the 'Student support' general category. The benefit of moving these categories within the structure was related to the general decision of changing the coding strategy, which is described below.

- Adding new categories. One additional category was created during the process of coding. This was 'Administrative issues' which was needed to classify those texts that were not related by their content to the course itself in terms of the quality of provision, but that in some way were affecting the delivery of the course. A further three categories were added as part of the restructuring process: 'Module evaluations', 'Student representation, complaints and appeals' and 'Annual reviews', required to classify the specific texts referred to each of the quality assurance procedures.

- Breaking down one general category into various subcategories for a more specific and accurate coding. This was the case with 'Quality assurance procedures', which was sub-divided into five specific categories: 'External examiners' that existed in a different position in the structure and was moved into this category; 'Module evaluations', 'Student representation, complaints and appeals, 'Annual reviews' and 'Other quality assurance procedures'. This last category was created as there were found to be some text instances related to quality assurance procedures that would not fit into any of the other sub-categories, but that were relevant and sufficient in number to keep under consideration.

As a result of these changes, a new coding structure was devised, which is presented in Table 5.2.

Regarding the operational definitions of the codes, some changes were made to provide more accurate descriptions of the aspects which would be included in each category. For example, it was stated more explicitly that 'Teaching methods' included references to the materials used in the teaching and learning activities; and that the category 'Before the start of the course' included all references to student intake, student registration and number of students by module. The new codes' operational definitions are presented in Appendix Four.

Table 5.2 Modified list of codes

Quality Assurance Aspects	General Categories	Specific Categories
	Administrative issues	
STANDARDS OF OUTCOMES	Course definition	Intended learning outcomes
		Expectations
		Curriculum
		Assessment
LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES	Teaching and learning	Student capacity
		Staff capacity
		Teaching methods
		Student achievement
		Student expectations
	Student support	Before the start of the course
		During delivery
		Academic support
		Accessibility & Equal opportunities issues
	Learning resources	Staff
		Facilities
		Delivery system
QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES for ENHANCEMENT	Quality assurance procedures	External examiners
		Module evaluations
		Student representation, complaints and appeals
		Annual Review
		Other quality assurance procedures

The second decision taken as a result of the pilot coding process was related to the coding strategy. As pointed out above, one difficulty encountered in the process of coding was related to the approach taken by considering all categories as being at the same level, making the discrimination process in-between the categories laborious and complex. To reduce this problem, a new strategy was defined by which the texts would be coded following a two-step process. First, the text would be classified according to the general category to which it was referring; after the selection of the general category, the text would be coded by choosing from amongst the specific sub-categories integrating that particular general category. It was expected that in this way, the process of choosing the correct

category under which to code each section of text would be more precise and simple. This structure of the codes would also allow cross-analysis of a general category with another specific category, making the analysis of the main study's data richer and more flexible.

Finally, the third decision taken was that no further refined categories were to be produced. Consequently, no inductive coding process was carried out. This decision was taken based on the fact that the categories used during the pilot proved to be specific enough to provide a good description of the content of the documents analysed, and further refinement would have meant taking the data directly, without making use of the codes' 'condensation' qualities (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Additionally, in the revision of the codes and their operational definitions, presented in Table 5.2 and Appendix Four, the categories were already taking account of what the data was revealing, thus integrating the issues and aspects that were not discriminated against in the very first list of coding (Table 4.1).

Applying modifications

The application of these changes to the Nvivo project was a three-step process. Firstly, the new category structure and naming were uploaded. Secondly, the texts which had been coded under a modified category were corrected, as was the case for 'Quality assurance procedures'. Also, the texts under the categories where definitions were changed were recoded, as was the case for 'Expectations'. Thirdly, the texts coded for each category were revised to verify that all text sections were coded correctly, and to verify that they matched with the new coding approach. To illustrate the modified coding strategy, a sample of the coded text is presented in Appendix Five.

Map of quality assurance issues present in the pilot study's documents

The next step of the analysis consisted of the comparison between what was found in the documents with what was expected to be found, according to the theoretical map of quality issues that procedures should be covering. This comparison was designed to provide a picture of what was being covered by the quality assurance procedures in place, and also to highlight some of the gaps.

This comparative analysis was done by reviewing the texts coded under each category and

checking if the content was present within the categories and issues described according to the literature, presented in Appendix Three.

As a result of this comparative analysis, it was found that some issues included in the theoretical map of quality assurance were not being covered by any of the documents analysed, and others were covered only in a very general way.

Among the issues not covered by the documents were:

- There were no accounts of the relation of the intended learning outcomes to external reference points (such as QAA infrastructure) or to the overall aims of the institution, even though the learning outcomes were well described and clearly stated in the documents.

- The documents gave no references to what the course expected from staff. All texts referring to expectations were related to students.

- The relationship between the curriculum and the learning outcomes, or the effectiveness of the curriculum to deliver the learning outcomes was absent from the documents, although the curriculum was extensively addressed.

- Accessibility issues for disabled students were not present in any of the documents. Issues like accessible electronic information and materials, alternative teaching strategies and IT support for access were not mentioned in any of the documents. Although this absence of references is most probably related to the fact that no disabled students were enrolled on the course, the course handbook did not mention any specific support that disabled students might be able to get (there was only a general reference for who to contact for general disability support).

- It was also interesting to note the absence of references to the aspects relating to the delivery system of the course; according to the literature, issues like the reliability of the system and the contingency plans should be considered. None of these were mentioned in any of the documents. Although the category was present in the documents, the texts found referred to other issues, such as the information for students on how the system was organised and how to access it, among others.

- In relation to the quality assurance procedures, the documents omitted references to three aspects: staff feedback, feedback from former students and employers, and quality assurance procedures for materials, which were not part of the strategies considered in

the course reviews. Although it could be argued that staff feedback was collected within the discussions carried out in the team meetings, it was not formally recorded as such.

Some of the quality assurance aspects were covered in a rather general way by the documents, however one of them – 'Teaching methods' – deserves special attention. Reviewing its content, it highlighted the differences in the level of detail observed in the references to the course made by these texts. The disparity seemed to be directly associated with the source of the texts: those texts which were student comments regarding the course were very specific, while the comments from tutors to similar issues were rather general. For example, in the module evaluation for Module 1 in 2001, students said:

> This course seemed like a traditional distance course – not an online course. It appeared as though the form of delivery, activities chosen, and assessment tasks were just transplants of face-to-face or traditional distance courses and didn't exploit the potential of online delivery. More online collaborative activities could have been included' why not digitize some lectures (audio or video) rather than just having students read all the materials? Instead I felt like I was just reading and doing tasks on my own as I would in an older, non-web based, distance course. All input was reading, materials were sent be regular mail, and even assignments were to be mailed in by regular mail. Why?
>
> ....but there was little online teaching or learning involved. Any management done by the tutor was very well done, but we didn't do much as a group. In fact, I never really felt part of a group.

After these comments, in the team meeting of 2002 the report on the survey results was very brief:

> [The module tutor] reported that he had so far received 5 evaluation reports from the autumn term. These had been mainly positive.

In 2004 the reporting of student comments by staff had improved considerably, as can be seen in the following extract. In the module evaluation for Module 5 students had stated their opinions regarding time allocation for the activities and their interest in working in pairs and small groups. Later that year, in the team meeting, the results were reported as follows:

> [The module tutor] reported that 16 module evaluations were received from a total of 25 students. Students commented on the heavy reading load, which [name of tutor] intends to look into for next year. Mixed feedback was received regarding the format of posting on [the VLE] and some suggested more group work to be included in this module. [The module tutor] is taking into consideration these comments for next year.

This improvement in the way student comments were reported and addressed can also be

seen in the increasing concentration of the document's content on 'Teaching and learning' issues over the years. As can be seen in Table 5.3, the 'Teaching and learning' general category was the issue on which the documents were focused over the three years, and particularly on the 'Teaching methods' sub-category.

Table 5.3 Percentage of documents' characters coded under each category per year (in relation to each year's total) – Pilot Study

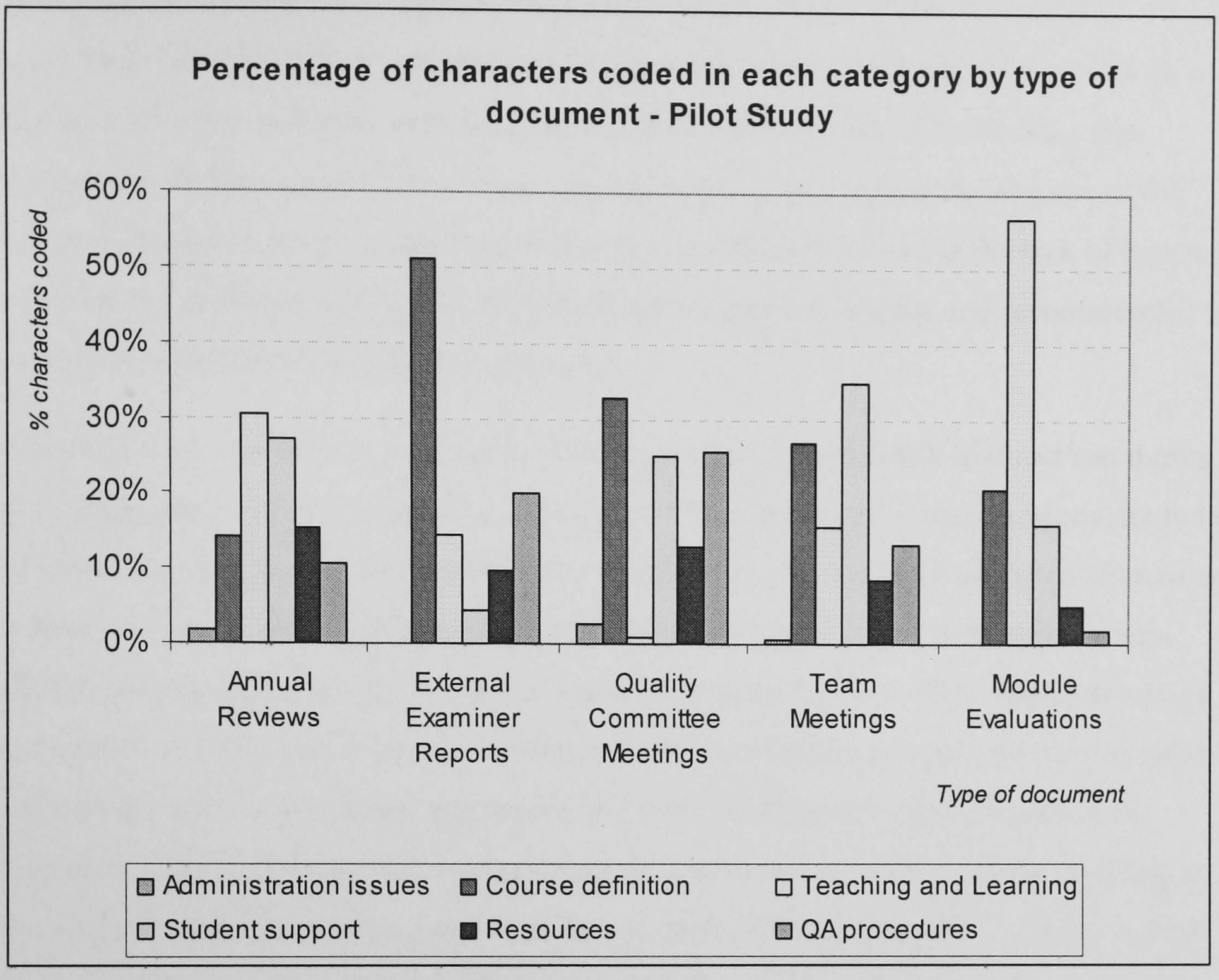
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total
Administration issues	4%	-	-	1%
Course definition	19%	27%	26%	25%
ILOs	1%	1%	-	1%
Expectations	-	-	-	-
Curriculum	9%	9%	10%	9%
Assessment	9%	17%	15%	15%
Teaching and Learning	25%	23%	34%	29%
Student Capacity	3%	3%	3%	3%
Staff Capacity	1%	2%	6%	4%
Teaching Methods	14%	11%	18%	15%
Student Expectations	1%	2%	3%	2%
Student Achievement	6%	6%	3%	4%
Student support	32%	19%	23%	24%
Before Start Course	17%	10%	7%	10%
During Delivery	6%	1%	5%	4%
Academic support	6%	6%	7%	7%
Accessibility-Equal Opportunities	3%	2%	4%	3%
Resources	7%	11%	10%	10%
Staff	2%	5%	5%	4%
Facilities	3%	6%	5%	5%
Delivery System	1%	-	1%	1%
QA procedures	12%	20%	7%	11%
External Examiners	4%	7%	2%	4%
Module Evaluation	4%	8%	2%	4%
Stud Rep, complaints & appeals	3%	1%	2%	2%
Annual Review	1%	1%	-	-
Other QA procedures	-	3%	-	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

As was discussed in the methodology chapter, the unit of analysis was defined as the sections of the texts that satisfy the description given for one coding category. Considering that the structure of the documents and writing styles may have been influencing the order in which the issues were reported in the documents, the number of text sections cannot be taken as a representation of the relevance of the aspect in the documents found. Consequently, the way to analyse the data of the documents and interviews in terms of the issues dominating the texts is by considering the number of characters coded under each category.

Grouping the documents under five categories (module evaluations, team meetings, quality committee meetings, external examiner reports and annual reviews) it is possible to see how the focus of the categories coded changed, and how this indicates the issues which were dominant in each type of document. As can be seen in Figure 5.1, it is possible to see that 'Teaching and learning' issues were predominant in module evaluations and, to a lesser degree, in annual reviews documents. In the team meeting minutes the emphasis was on 'Student support'; and the quality committee meeting minutes and external examiners' reports focused primarily on 'Course definition' issues.

Analysing the content of the texts, it was interesting to note that although some types of documents shared the category on which they were focusing, the level of detail with which their texts are referring to that topic is different. This is the case of the 'Teaching and learning' focus found on both module evaluations and annual reviews. While module evaluations gathered very specific comments of students about teaching methods and their own level of engagement in the activities, the annual review reports tended to be very formal and quite general in their description of teaching and learning practices and approaches. On the one hand this may be due to the tendency for annual reports to be more general, giving an overview of the year under review. On the other hand, it seemed that the format in which the reports needed to be presented – completion of a form with ready-defined questions and with no space for free and open descriptions – reinforced this lack of specificity about what was done during the year. A different reason for this lack of specificity could be the fact that the annual review form had been created for face-to-face courses, and there was no evidence that it had been adapted for the online modality.

Figure 5.1 Percentage of characters coded under each general category, by type of document – Pilot Study



The documents were also analysed over the three-year period covered by the documentation to see whether any of the issues which came to light at any point were mentioned and addressed at later stages of the course quality assurance process. To this end, three issues were identified and followed up across the documents. The first two were raised by students at a very early stage of the course delivery and recorded in the module evaluation report for the first module that ran during the autumn term of 2001.

The first issue referred to the lack of time allocated for students to master the technology before the start of the module. This comment was not mentioned during any of the subsequent staff meetings, and the next time it appeared was five months later when it was announced that the following year, the course would start three weeks earlier to facilitate student orientation and to avoid any technical problems. After that, it was mentioned as a resolved issue in the annual review for that year.

The second issue mentioned in this module evaluation was a problem found by students when they were working with a textbook that did not have the answer keys, and which they

found difficult to cope with on their own. The issue was not mentioned by the course team until after the second run of the module two years later (2003) when the module evaluation came back with many more references to the same problem of dealing with a book that had no keys when students were studying at a distance. Just after this, the issue was brought up by the course team in their meeting where it was agreed that the use of the textbook would be revised. Although it was not possible to find out if the lack of keys was resolved in a different way, the book was still part of the reading list and recommended for purchase in the 2004/05 student handbook.

The third issue was raised by students in the evaluation for a module that had run during the spring term of 2004. In this case, only three students answered the questionnaire but all of them were in agreement. They complained about the performance of the module tutor, indicating also that they had complained formally to the course leader during the term about the issue. Interestingly, this issue was not mentioned in any other quality assurance documents for that year. The only reference found was the account given by the module tutor to the team – which was reported in the team meeting minutes – regarding the responses. The tutor is quoted as dismissing the evaluation answers, without referring to the content of the responses, because s/he was of the opinion that three responses were not enough to consider the complaint constructively. The annual review report for that year did not mention it as a student complaint either.

The criteria used in the latter case for considering students' comments seem to contrast with the other two cases. The issue of the induction period was only mentioned by one student and it was taken into account. In the case of the complaint about the tutor, it is most probable that the sensitivity of the issue meant that it was dealt with in private. Nevertheless, what is important to highlight here is that it was the tutor under examination who was feeding back the results of the questionnaire to the team. The annual review documentation states that students' feedback was processed by the administrator and then discussed at the next team meeting. However, the process involved the person who was the tutor of the module evaluated who then reported back to the team meeting, and there was no evidence found that the rest of the team members were in receipt of copies of any of the questionnaire summaries.

This way of dealing with the issues raised by students in the module evaluations might explain the lack of detail found in the discussion of the teaching and learning issues observed in the documents. Teaching and learning issues raised by students such as feeling

isolated during their work, the allocation of insufficient time for the online tasks, and that tasks were mainly for individual work and contributions were not meant to be discussed, were not being addressed by the team as a course design problem. This lack of discussion by the course team of the specific issues relating to teaching and learning might also be related to one of the main features of the online modality which is the low level of visibility in which online learning occurs. Considering that the module tutors processed the information gathered in the questionnaires and reported back to the team, teaching and learning issues might have got lost in their own consideration of what was relevant or not. On the other hand, the absence of any other form of peer review or evaluation among staff (as there is for the face-to-face teaching) preserves this low level of visibility, and as a result, the issues tended to disappear from the discussion.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the online environment would have an effect on the type of information gathered from the students. It would not be of the same nature as that expected in a face-to-face environment, given that written feedback might prompt a different type of comment from students, and compared with what it is possible to collect in a face-to-face conversation. Some students experienced confusion while responding to the module evaluation form. The questions in the form were clearly based on a face-to-face modality questionnaire. For example, the questionnaire asked students to rate the 'online teaching sessions'. One student's first comment was: 'I'm not sure what this refers to unless I missed something', and then continued answering according to what s/he understood by the question.

To summarise, what appears to be clear from the coding of the quality assurance documentation is that although the procedures seemed to cover most of the relevant issues for the assurance of the quality of the course, they did not seem to do it with the necessary detail required to address the issues raised by some participants on the course. This could be due to the fact that the quality assurance procedures had not been appropriately adapted to the online modality and in this way they were not asking the questions in the most appropriate way, or they were obtaining incomplete answers and descriptions, or the answers were too general.

Data for pilot study: interviews

The contact with the interviewees started with a meeting with the course leader. On this

occasion, it was agreed that the course leader would send an e-mail to all academic and administrative staff involved in the course to inform them about this research project and that they would be contacted directly with an explanation of the details and the purpose of the interview. Once this was completed, a personalised e-mail was sent out to each staff member where an interview was formally requested at a day and time convenient to them. Seven academic staff and one administrator, who were all at that moment participating in the course, agreed to be interviewed. Regarding students, the course leader decided that the administrator would send an invitation to four students who could be interviewed face-to-face. Although it was slow to get the answers back from the students, this way of contacting them was effective as finally three out of the four students were interviewed.

The eleven interviews were carried out by the author of this research project[4]. Each interview started by giving a general overview of the problems and issues being studied and explaining the main goals for the interview. The commitment to keep all content of the interview confidential and anonymous was also clearly stated. Finally, before starting the interview, they were asked for permission to record the conversation. They all agreed with no objection.

According to the design described in the methodology chapter, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style and followed a detailed guideline to the topics being covered. Each interviewee type (course leader, academic staff, administrator, student, support staff, designer/developer and employers) had its own set of guidelines (see Appendix Six) which was used to ensure that all the topics identified as relevant to their role were covered. During the interviews the questions were not read directly from the guidelines, as this was only an outline of the topics to cover and the questions written were only a reminder of how they could be phrased. This approach meant that although most interviews started with a very general 'icebreaking' question, they tended to follow different paths depending on what the interviewee was mentioning in his/her responses. At the end of each interview, interviewees were asked to read through a summary of the findings obtained from the document analysis for them to comment on. These summaries had also been customised for each interviewee type and they were reviewed and approved by the course leader before they were used (see Appendix Seven).

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4 All interviews were carried out during April and May 2005

All interviewees displayed a positive attitude towards the questions posed and most of them became very interested in the conversation as it went along, despite an occasional slow start. Most of them seemed relaxed and did not demonstrate any apprehension in answering most of the questions. Some however showed signs of concern, mainly expressed by limiting their answers, for example, not allowing themselves to express an opinion on some topics.

Interviews varied considerably in length. Most of the academic staff interviews lasted the planned time of around one hour each, with the exception of two staff interviews which lasted less than thirty minutes. These very short interviews interestingly corresponded to those staff who had demonstrated concerns and tended to have a rather suspicious attitude towards the role of the interviews. Students' interviews lasted between thirty and forty five minutes each which was the expected duration.

All interviews were digitally recorded. The files were downloaded onto a personal computer and password protected. The transcripts were carried out through an external company which provided the security measures required, and they were later revised and corrected.

The interview strategy

An initial problem regarding the way in which the interviews were carried out was the strategy of showing the interviewees a brief account of what was found in the previous stage of the document analysis (Appendix Seven). The reason for showing these summaries to the interviewees was to gather more information on the specific issues described in them. The feedback provided by the interviewees after reading the summary however was no more detailed than what had already been gathered during the course of the interviews, and in that sense, it was not particularly useful. Furthermore, the issues presented in the summaries had already been covered during the interviews in a less threatening way for the interviewees. The interviewees perceived the written accounts as an evaluation of how the course was managed; and as a result, they tended to justify rather than to further explain the issues represented. It was therefore decided not to use these summaries in the main study, as it would be more useful to incorporate the issues found in the document analysis through the questions posed to the interviewees rather than presenting them with a formal written summary.

A second issue that required revision was the number of staff and students interviewed. In respect to staff members, during the pilot, seven tutors representing the full team were interviewed. Analysing the content provided by these interviewees, there was no evidence to support the need to interview all members of the course team, as there was no additional information gathered as more people were interviewed. Staff accounts of the course were notably similar, making it possible to reduce the number of academic staff to be interviewed in the next stage of this project, provided that all staff key roles are represented (course leader, tutor, administrator, developer/designer and support). This reduction would make the main study – with four cases studies– more manageable in terms of the amount of data to analyse, without compromising the quality of it.

On the other hand, considerable fresh and relevant issues were revealed during the process of collecting data from the students, suggesting that increasing the number of students to interview would be beneficial for the main study. Considering that most students participating in the courses under study are at a distance, it may be very difficult to get additional face-to-face interviews; for this reason, it was decided that a supplementary data collection activity in the main study was going to be carried out. As a way of obtaining data from a wider sample of students, a short online questionnaire would be prepared for each case study to check whether the views expressed by the students interviewed face-to-face are representative of the wider student body. This data would provide the necessary evidence to support the views obtained through the interviews.

A third aspect needing reviewing concerned the interview guidelines. Although they worked well in providing a guide to the topics and issues to cover, the experience in the pilot study provided information to improve its structure and content. The key changes that applied to the guidelines were:

- To begin the interviews with a more clear 'icebreaking' question that does not refer to the course under study itself, but to the interviewee and his/her experience of the course and their role on the course.

- To simplify the guidelines so that they cover the main issues instead of explicitly presenting the type of questions to ask. This would simplify the process of checking the issues which have already been covered during the interviews.

- To include some additional specific topics that appeared in the pilot staff interviews which were important to cover in the interviews in the main study. These topics were: a

comparison with face-to-face courses, and the role of the external examiners and their reports.

The revised guidelines are presented in Appendix Eight.

Finally, it is important to mention here the problems encountered with interviewing employers and support staff. Although several efforts were made to meet and interview people with these roles, it was not possible during the pilot. In the case of support staff, it was not possible to get a response from anyone in this position on the course. Although this may have affected the range of views gathered for this case study, the reason for its non-inclusion had no further implications for the main study. In contrast, the pilot study revealed that it would not be easy to gain access to people in the role of being employers. Through the students interviewed, the initial plan had been to explore whether their employers had any role in the student's decision to take the course under study, and to gain access to interview at least one of the employers. However this turned out not to be the case; of the three students interviewed, only one was funded by their employer, who had no intervention in the student's decision about the course. Although this situation may be particular to the pilot, it should be noted that the likelihood of interviewing employers would depend on the courses taking part in the main study.

Analysis of the interviews

To analyse the interviews, all transcriptions were uploaded into Nvivo and coded by the categories defined and corrected in the previous stage (see Table 5.2 and Appendix Four).

Mapping out the issues covered in the interviews – shown separated by interviewee type and their totals in Table 5.4 – it is clear to see that the most mentioned aspect by interviewees was 'Teaching and learning' issues, with a specific focus on 'Teaching methods' and 'Staff capacity'.

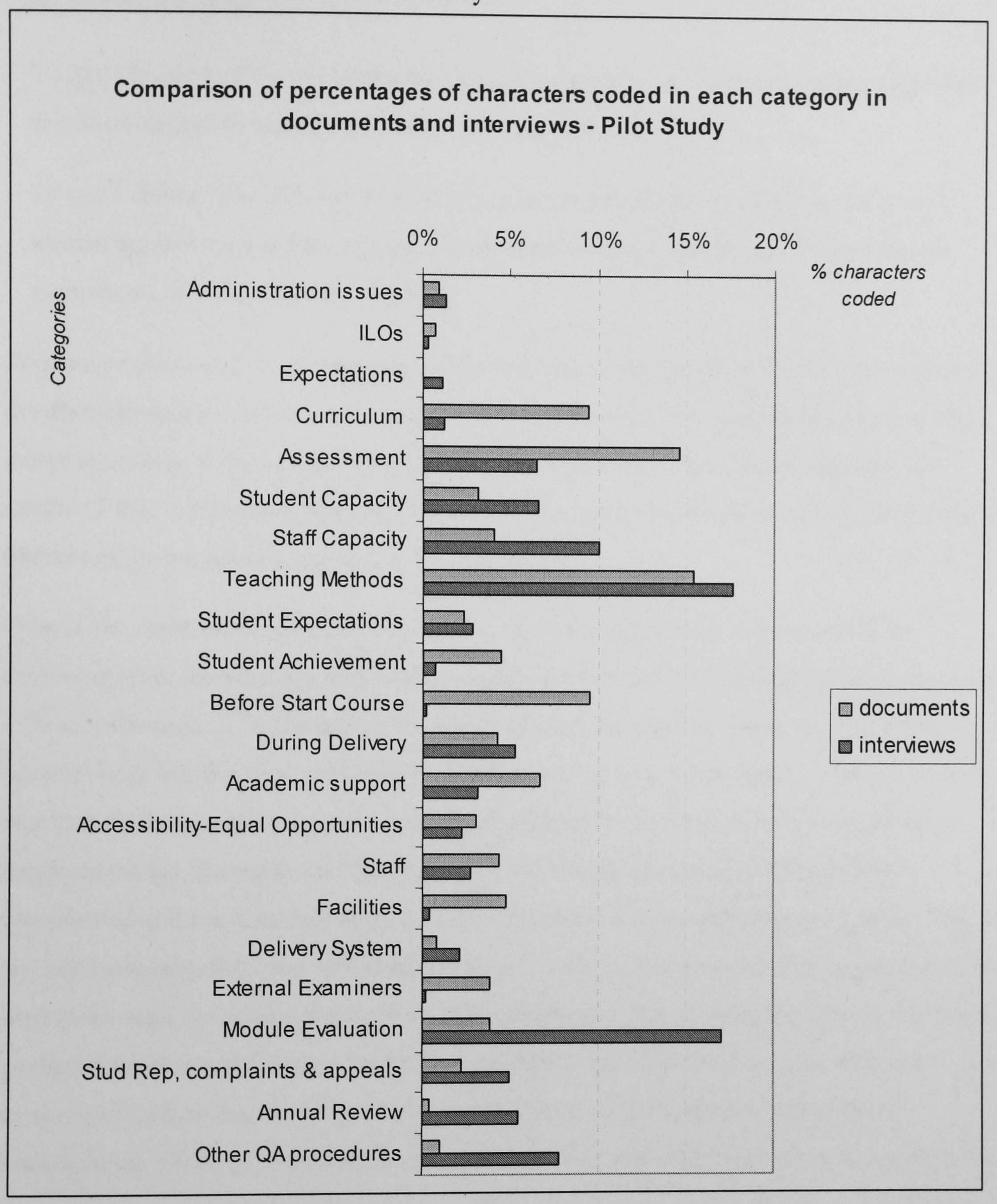
By observing these figures, it also seems evident that the data from the interviews was strongly skewed by the questions asked. The structure of the interviews was designed to give space for the interviewees to expand on their responses and to follow up on particular topics. Their answers however, clearly followed the topics suggested by the questions in the interviews. The interview responses were mainly focused on two general categories: 'Teaching and learning' and on the 'Quality assurance procedures', as can be seen in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4 Percentage of characters coded under each category by interviewee type (in relation to each interviewee type's total)

	Staff	Students	Total
Administration issues	2%	-	1%
Course definition	12%	-	9%
ILOs	-	-	-
Expectations	1%	-	1%
Curriculum	2%	-	1%
Assessment	8%	-	6%
Teaching and Learning	33%	55%	38%
Student Capacity	3%	19%	7%
Staff Capacity	11%	6%	10%
Teaching Methods	18%	16%	18%
Student Expectations	-	12%	3%
Student Achievement	1%	1%	1%
Student support	11%	11%	11%
Before Start Course	-	-	-
During Delivery	6%	2%	5%
Academic support	2%	8%	3%
Accessibility-Equal Opportunities	3%	1%	2%
Resources	5%	7%	5%
Staff	4%	-	3%
Facilities	-	-	-
Delivery System	1%	7%	2%
QA procedures	38%	27%	36%
External Examiners	-	-	-
Module Evaluation	17%	17%	17%
Stud Rep, complaints & appeals	3%	10%	5%
Annual Review	7%	-	6%
Other QA procedures	10%	-	8%
Total	100%	100%	100%

The emphasis on these aspects corresponds to the content of the interview guidelines which were designed to fill the gaps found in the documents. This mismatch between the documents and the interviews' content however is a design feature of the study. The comparison between the documents' and interviews' emphasis can be seen in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2 Comparison of percentage of characters coded under each category in documents and interviews – Pilot Study



Having said that, the interviews were carried out with three main goals in mind:

- To get the stakeholders' account of the general characteristics and the quality of the course under study, and to obtain a description of any issues that they would consider relevant during their participation in the course. The aim of this account was to provide a contrasting perspective of how the 'course is/was' in comparison to the account built up through the analysis of the documentation. This comparison aimed to identify the

gaps which were expected to be found in the application of quality assurance procedures on an online course.

- To get a better and deeper understanding of how some of the quality issues identified in the documentation were perceived by the stakeholders.

- To get a closer view of how the quality assurance procedures worked in the course, identifying the main issues regarding their applicability, usability and benefit for the assurance and enhancement of quality.

To achieve these aims, a comparison of the content of the interviews with the content of the documentation within each category was carried out, to see whether there were any issues appearing in the interviews which were not present in the documentation. The results of this comparison showed that there were some aspects of the course that were not mentioned in the documentation.

One of the most interesting new aspects found in the interviews was the different reasoning given by students and staff to explain the limited participation of students in the online environment. In the quality assurance documentation this issue was mentioned several times but the view presented in the documents (e.g. in the team meeting minutes) was that the lack of participation was directly related to the absence of an attendance requirement for the students. This approach was confirmed by all staff members interviewed and the way they tended to see the solution was only by looking for a change in the institutional policy that would allow them to impose this requirement on students. The interviews with the students revealed a different reason. All of them recognised that their participation was not frequent, but their explanation for this situation was different to that of the staff. According to the students, the low level of participation was a direct consequence of the overloading of activities on them, and their difficulties in coping with the tight schedule of tasks and deadlines. These differences, although they might be logical, would lead to different approaches regarding the improvement of the course itself.

A second notable difference was the absence of references – observed in the documentation – to the lack of commitment shown by staff with the online course. This issue emerged from the fact that the online version ran in parallel with a face-to-face version of the course, and academic staff were usually engaged in both. Although the course leader seemed to have a very strong opinion on this issue during the interview, it was also mentioned by some of the other staff who indicated that, for them, tutoring on

the online course was an activity they felt was an additional task to their normal duties. The absence of references to this issue in the documentation might well be a consequence of its nature, as it is a very sensitive issue for both course leader and staff to write down in formal documents.

There was an additional issue that came up in the staff interviews that was not mentioned at all in the documentation: students in the online course were more engaged with the activities designed, and achieved better results at the end, in comparison with face-to-face students. Activities in the online course were the same as those taking place in the face-to-face sessions (according to the academics' own accounts) and their comparison was made on the level of engagement students showed on them. It is worth noting that this opinion contrasted with the comments made by the same tutors regarding their overall view of online learning. These tutors expressed the rather contradictory view that distance learning 'is not as good as face-to-face learning' and the main reason given to support this view was that students do not have the same commitment and involvement as in the face-to-face environment. These somewhat conflicting opinions could be partly explained by circumstances in that these were the tutors who stated that they did not feel comfortable teaching online.

A different but important outcome of this comparison concerned the information gathered about the quality assurance procedures themselves. This information was not clearly visible in the documentation, most probably as a consequence of the nature of the documents. The documents were reports of the application of the quality assurance procedures and in this sense they were not meant to include references to the procedures; they just reported on the issues pertaining to the course they were reviewing.

The interviews revealed that in general, the quality assurance procedures were not structured or applicable in a way and at a time that was suitable, even for face-to-face courses. It was apparent that some of the interviewees disapproved of the application of some of the procedures (like the annual reviews). Academic staff in particular could hardly see any benefits of their application, for them or for the course. Many of the staff interviewed described the application of the quality assurance procedures as a process they 'had to do', and hence they were applying them in the simplest possible way. These comments move the analysis of the adequacy of the quality assurance procedures for the online courses onto a different level, as it appears the need to analyse how appropriate the procedures are themselves, before exploring how appropriate they are for the online

modality. This issue however would not be included in this analysis as it is not the focus of this research project, and the data available is not sufficient to explore it in more detail. An investigation of this issue would need to be considered for a future research project.

Returning back to the data collected on the quality assurance procedures, there were five mechanisms in place on this course: module evaluations, annual reviews, external examiners, student representation and team meetings.

Bearing in mind that the main focus here is to establish whether and to what extent these procedures were appropriate for the online course, the data collected in the interviews revealed two of the mechanisms were the most affected by the online modality: module evaluation and student representation.

The module evaluation procedure was defined in the institution in which the pilot course was located as a paper or electronic form; this form was centrally designed, and all students were asked to answer it at the end of each term and for each module. From the outset, there was a problem with the form concerning the questions; according to the academic staff interviewed, the form could not be fully modified, although they had slightly adapted it for the online modality. However, as highlighted in the analysis of the documentation, the adaptation of the form was apparently still not enough, as several questions remained which the students did not fully understand. This issue with the student evaluation form does not seem to be a direct consequence of the online modality, but with the perceived rigidity of the central guidelines on management and administration of forms.

Two further issues were identified in the application of the evaluation forms that could be associated with the online modality. The first problem was the low number of module evaluation forms being handed in by students each term. On average, less than a third of students on each module were providing feedback. Although this issue was mentioned at some point in the documentation, there was no evidence that any discussion had taken place regarding how to tackle the problem or how the evaluation form return rates could be improved. During the interviews however it became clear that this problem had been subjected to extensive analysis, and staff were very concerned about the lack of feedback from the students. They were also particularly worried about not being able to take the few comments received into account due to the low number of evaluation forms returned. This view was however more strongly expressed when the few forms returned contained negative comments rather than positive ones. It was apparent that this issue was having serious repercussions as the response rate was so low that any type of generalisation was

impossible, leaving the course team without any formal data they could rely on. It was then quite surprising to find out that the extended discussions that staff had had on this issue were not included in the quality assurance documentation.

The second issue regarding module evaluations concerned the way in which the forms were distributed to students. All of the academic staff interviewed agreed that the main cause of the low return rates was the remote location of students, which they saw as a problem with no obvious solution to it. They all mentioned – as a way to demonstrate the impossibility of getting more forms back from the distance learners – that in the face-to-face version of the course, all students could be assembled in a room together where the forms would be handed out to each of them and this would determine a 90% return of the forms. The academic staff interviewed did not question whether students were putting real effort into giving meaningful answers in the forms under this process. In addition, none of them highlighted a need to explore different ways to distribute the form in the online version of the course as a way to improve return rates.

The interviews with students however revealed a slightly different picture of what was happening with the module evaluation forms. Although all students interviewed indicated they had almost always answered the form, they highlighted two issues which affected their responses. The first issue was related to the form itself; students mentioned the fact that they were receiving the forms while they were busy working on their assignments and this subsequently affected the time dedicated to complete it, causing them sometimes to delay its return or they simply forgot about it. They also reported that the form seemed rather repetitive to them and arduous to answer. This observation was corroborated in some way by the account given by the administrator of the course who was in charge of collating the answers (in the administrator's opinion, the answers in the forms filled in by distant students tended to be longer and more complete compared with the forms filled in by face-to-face students). The second issue mentioned by the students interviewed was the fact that the form was not totally anonymous and this put them under some stress regarding the answers they were giving. The form was normally sent out by e-mail to the students who had to complete it. They sent it back electronically to the administrator of the course who would then develop a report for the staff to review.

The second procedure that was also strongly affected by the online modality was student representation. According to the regulations of the institution where the pilot course was located, each cohort of students should have a student representative. In the view of the

staff members, student representation was clearly an unresolved issue, as they had not managed to recruit a student representative in the previous year. For staff, the main problem with student representatives was imagining how to make the representation work, as the key space for their physical participation was the face-to-face team meetings held every term. One planned solution for this problem was to make the online student representative liaise with the face-to-face student representative, so they could participate in the meeting through the campus-based representative who would put forward their specific issues in the meeting. This system, although theoretically possible, never actually happened. The students' view on this procedure was more pessimistic. According to them it would be really difficult to have a representative of the distance students, even more so considering their lack of time which would make the task a very arduous one for any of the students.

Comparative account of the pilot case study

It is possible to produce a unitary account of the course by drawing together the data from the documents and interviews carried out in this pilot study. This description is focused on the main areas where divergence was found in-between the issues reported by the documents and the interviews, as revealed during the analysis of each of the data sets.

The documents and interviews were mostly complementary in respect to the aspects related to the course definition. This was due to the fact that the major part of the data referred to in this topic was coming from the documents, which covered it well enough; hence, the interviews only partially covered this topic. There were nevertheless two issues that presented slight levels of discrepancy and these were: expectations from staff, and the assessment regulations on attendance.

The module handbooks, which contained some statements about what the course expected from tutors, were not included amongst the documentation analysed; and this only became apparent after interviewing the course leader. Consequently, staff were asked during the interviews about this issue; a few indicated they were not clear about what was required from them, but the majority stated they knew relatively well what they were expected to do as an online tutor. The interesting point here is that although they expressed general recognition about what they were expected to do, there was an underlying issue about the level of commitment that staff would demonstrate with the course. This issue was not captured by the documentation but appeared in many of the interviews with staff.

Although this may not have had an impact on the quality of the teaching and the student experience on the course, it could explain in part the frequent calls to staff to encourage student participation – by sending messages in the online environment – that were found in the documentation. The explicit explanation given by staff regarding the lack of student participation was usually, as noted earlier, the absence of an 'attendance' requirement. It appeared during the interviews however that staff were aware that a stronger encouragement on their part would have improved student participation, but their own lack of time or commitment was obstructing this from happening.

Complementing this view about student participation was the explanation that students themselves gave of their lack of frequent participation. Students explained their absence from some online activities as being caused by the overload of activities; this issue, although mentioned in the module evaluations, was not taken into account by staff in later stages of the quality assurance process. The lack of recognition by staff of the reasons students gave to justify their own non-participation may originate from the low return rates of the module evaluation forms (as was indicated earlier, the low return rates resulted in staff dismissing their content as a source of information for their course reviews), limiting the capacity of the course team to consider the problem of low participation from the students' perspective.

There were also discrepancies with regard to the teaching and learning aspects of the course between the documents and the interviews. The quality assurance documentation tended to cover these issues in a rather general way, with the exception of those procedures where students were the source of the data (e.g. module evaluations). As indicated earlier, a new element emerged in the interviews with staff that was not covered by any of the documents reporting on staff views (such as team meetings or annual reviews); this was the staff's perception that students were performing to a higher standard in the online activities compared with face-to-face students. This perception clearly differs from the view presented in the documents, where students are shown as not participating enough in the online activities. This issue of lack of participation was discussed during the interviews where it was further explained. Staff were concerned generally about students staying on the course without participating online during modules, and then being able to pass anyway. Although this issue had an administrative side, the specific pedagogic implication according to staff was that such a 'gap' in the regulations made the distance learning modality 'inferior' to the face-to-face course. All the explanations given appeared to be

deeply entrenched. Staff seemed to be trapped by the administrative regulations ('no participation is accepted') and this was affecting their overall evaluation of the online modality itself, leading them to disregard their own experience with students, and the feedback received from the students in the module evaluations.

In relation to student support issues, although generally there was correspondence of the aspects covered by the documentation and the data gathered in the interviews, it is appropriate in this analysis to distinguish between administrative and technical support, and academic support. With regard to the administrative and technical support for students, it was noted that as an online course, there was apparently no realisation that institution-wide procedures may need to be modified in order to work properly at a distance. From the interviews it was observed that some general aspects of the support for students did not actually work well, but there was no record in the documentation about the need to adapt them accordingly. What seemed to be happening was that there was a basic perception that institution-wide procedures could not be modified. That may have been the case, although there was no evidence that proved it was true. The main problem with this position towards institution-wide procedures was that, implicitly, it considered administrative and technical support as irrelevant to the learning experience of students at a distance. An example of this approach was the problem described by staff of the way the submission of academic related forms were managed (such as assessment entry and deferral forms). These forms were still having to be sent to and received from the students by post, generating problems on many occasions for students' academic progression.

There was one issue with respect to the academic support, about which the interviews provided further insight, and this was the personal tutor's role. According to the documentation, there was a personal tutor system in place and it was working well. From the interviews however, it was revealed that the system was in place, but it was not in use. Staff had had hardly any contact with their tutees and even the one student who had attempted to contact his personal tutor had never attempted again as s/he failed to get any response. The interesting point was that staff were well aware of this problem, but this was not mirrored in the documentation.

Finally, it is important to reiterate the essential role of the interviews in providing key information about the quality assurance procedures themselves, on how they were operating and problems in their application. As described in detail earlier, there were two procedures – module evaluation and student representation – which were the most strongly

affected by the distance modality in their application.

Comments on the pilot study goals

From the results obtained which are described above, it is possible to indicate that the goals of the pilot study were fully achieved. The pilot allowed the identification of the type, range and limitations of the data to be collected, and this led to modifications in the data collection methods and coding structure. A key goal was to check whether the data collected would enable the research questions to be answered. In this sense, the data allowed the aspects that were not captured by the quality assurance documentation to be mapped out, as was described above.

Based on the above analysis of the pilot case study it is also possible to suggest that the information gathered through these data collection methods would be sufficient to answer the research questions of this project. Since the main focus of this study is to further explore and understand how dual-mode institutions approach the quality assurance of their online provision, the data gathered is providing insights into the main problems involved in the application of quality assurance procedures in online courses and how staff deal with these issues.

Conclusions

In this chapter the proposed methodology for collecting and analysing data was tested in one pilot online course, and as a result changes were made to different aspects of it.

The most relevant improvements made to the methodology were related to the coding strategy, the interview strategy and the results analysis. With regard to the coding strategy, the code structure and definitions were improved to match the nature of the data and to facilitate the process of data-analysis. In relation to the interviews, the guidelines were improved and also a complementary data collection exercise was suggested, involving students, to back up the limited number of students that can be contacted face-to-face in online courses.

Finally regarding the analysis, the pilot results suggest the data to be collected would allow the research questions of this project to be answered. This was down to the fact that it was

proved possible to explore and identify some of the issues of the online environment of the course under study that were affecting the effective implementation of the quality assurance procedures.

The revised methodology was applied to the four case studies that constitute the main study of this project, which are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter Six

Exploring quality assurance procedures: Mapping quality issues

The main study consisted of four case studies. Each of them was an online or mixed-mode course that had been subject to quality assurance procedures and it was part of the academic offer of a dual-mode higher education institution in England.

In the following sections, each case study is briefly introduced, the documentation collected is described in its institutional context and the general patterns observed in the results are presented. For their description and later analysis, the same terminology is used to name the different components and procedures. This is in order to avoid the possibility of the courses being identified due to the use of any specific terminology within their programmes, and also to facilitate comparability among the cases.

For the purpose of this research project, the word 'course' is used to describe a programme of study that leads to an accredited award (like as a Masters Degree, Diploma or Certificate). A 'course' is usually divided into 'modules' which constitute a basic assessed unit of study within the course, and is commonly equivalent to a terms' part-time study.

Cases for the main study

The selection of the cases for the main study was made based on their compliance with the conditions established in the research methodology. Following this, several English institutions were contacted to identify possible programmes of study that could become part of the research study.

A secondary criteria used was ease of access. As the methodology included the collation of a large amount of documentation, most of it confidential, in addition to face-to-face interviews of staff and students, it was essential to have good access to the institution. It may be argued that the restriction generated by this criterion led to significant bias in the representativeness of the cases, as all the courses finally chosen belong to higher education institutions located in London or its surrounding areas. Although the impact that this

criterion may have on the representativeness of the case studies is acknowledged, it was not considered sufficient to warrant the disqualification of any of the cases selected, as the location of the institution is not a variable that was thought to impact on the type of data to be collected.

The course leaders were contacted first by e-mail in order to explain the research project goals and to invite them to participate. This contact was followed by a meeting where course leaders were presented with an overview of the research aims and strategy, and also with the list of documentation and interviews that the methodology included. Course leaders formally agreed to participate in this study after consulting their course teams and any other relevant school/department authority.

In all four cases, a relevant issue in the process of acceptance was the clear definition of a confidentiality agreement for the use of the information which was to be requested. As was agreed previously in the pilot study, all individual names in interviews and documentation will be removed before processing them.

Data for main study: documents

The first set of data gathered for each case study included the quality assurance documentation related to the selected courses. The documents collected are presented in Table 6.1 and are organised by case study.

The documentation collected for each case study varied in some cases in size and content, as the different institutions organised and presented their records in different ways. The list in Table 6.1 shows the total number of the documents associated with each quality assurance procedure, including different types of documentation. For example, in the case of module evaluations, some case studies had included the form applied to students and/or the reports of its results. In some other cases, the documents under this heading are reports of particular events carried out with students to evaluate the modules.

Most of the documents were received in electronic form, with the exception of some external examiners reports which were converted into electronic form for their analysis. All documents were uploaded into Nvivo and coded following the categories defined and amended during the pilot study (see Table 5.2 and Appendix Four).

Table 6.1 Summary of quality assurance documents collected by case study

Type of document	Case Study 1	Case Study 2	Case Study 3	Case Study 4
Validation & specification	-	4	11	3
Team meeting minutes	3	5	3	-
Module Evaluations	1	5	5	1
Annual Reviews	2	2	1	4
External Examiner	-	5	2	3
Student Handbook	1	1	1	1
Tutor Handbook	1	-	1	1
Total	8	22	24	13

Data for main study: interviews

The analysis of the quality assurance documentation provided a picture of what was captured by the procedures in place in the courses under study. To identify the issues which were not captured by these procedures a set of interviews was carried out with a group of stakeholders in each of the courses.

The aim of these interviews was to get the stakeholders' views on the quality and features of their courses, providing complementary data to the documentation already analysed.

The selection of the interviewees was carried out based on their roles. These roles included: academic staff and tutors; administrator(s); students; employers; support staff – technical and other; and developers/designer(s). Seeking to cover as many roles as possible, but also keeping the numbers manageable, the target was to interview at least four staff and four students per course.

The contact with the interviewees started with a meeting with the course leaders and agreeing the way to proceed. A similar procedure was arranged with all of them: based on messages prepared by the researcher, course leaders would send e-mails to staff and students involved in the course to request their collaboration and asking them to contact the researcher directly in case they wanted to be interviewed.

The final number of interviews carried out is presented in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2 Total number of interviewees

	Case Study 1	Case Study 2	Case Study 3	Case Study 4	Total
Staff	4	3	4	5	16
Students	2	4	3	1	10
Total	6	7	7	6	26

Under the category of 'staff' there were academics, tutors, administrators, support staff and developers. It was not possible to gain access to any employers. From the interviews with students it became clear that most of them were paying for their courses by themselves, and in the cases where an employer was involved in funding a course, the employer had no role or voice in the selection of the course.

The interview process

All interviews[5] were carried out in accordance with the BERA ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004), with a general overview provided at the start of the research project and an explanation of the main goals for the interview. The commitment to keep all content of the interview confidential and to anonymise it for its reporting was also clearly stated. Finally, before starting, interviewees were asked for permission to record the interview. They all agreed with no objection.

The interviews were conducted by the author of this research, keeping to the following sequence:

1. Introduction, during which the researcher introduced herself to the interviewee; explained the purpose of the research and why s/he was selected; gave assurance of anonymity and confidentiality of responses; and asked for permission to record the interview.
2. Main body of interview following the guidelines according to each interviewee role.
3. Close.

The interviews were carried out individually, following a semi-structured design, and a

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[5] All interviews were carried out from November 2005 until January 2006.

detailed guideline of the topics to be covered. Each interviewee type (course leader, academic staff, administrator, student, support staff and developers/designer) had its own set of guidelines (see Appendices Nine to Twelve). These guidelines were used as a reference to cover all the topics identified as relevant to their role and the particular case study.

Most interviews were carried out face-to-face and some over the phone. All interviews were digitally recorded. The files were downloaded into a personal computer and password protected. The transcriptions were undertaken by an external company which provided the security measures required, and they were later reviewed and corrected.

Supplementary data: student surveys

As discussed after the pilot study, the information gathered from the students' interviews would be reinforced with a short survey to collect further data from a wider group of students. The aim of this survey was to reach a larger number of students in order to check whether the views expressed by the students interviewed were representative of a wider body of students.

The structure of the surveys was organised around a set of statements and students were asked to express their level of agreement to each of them. The statements were drawn from all student interviews to build a basic template of the survey which was then customised according to the specific features of each case study. The survey forms and results are presented in Appendix Thirteen.

The role of the results of these surveys was different from the interviews themselves. This data was not coded and was only used to check the extent to which the student's opinions gathered in the interviews were supported, as some of them presented fresh new views regarding some aspects of their courses.

Strategy for analysing the interviews

As a first step in the analysis of the interviews, all transcription were uploaded into Nvivo and coded by the categories defined in the methodology and amended after the pilot study (see Table 5.2 and Appendix Four).

Within this research project the interviews were planned with three main goals in mind:

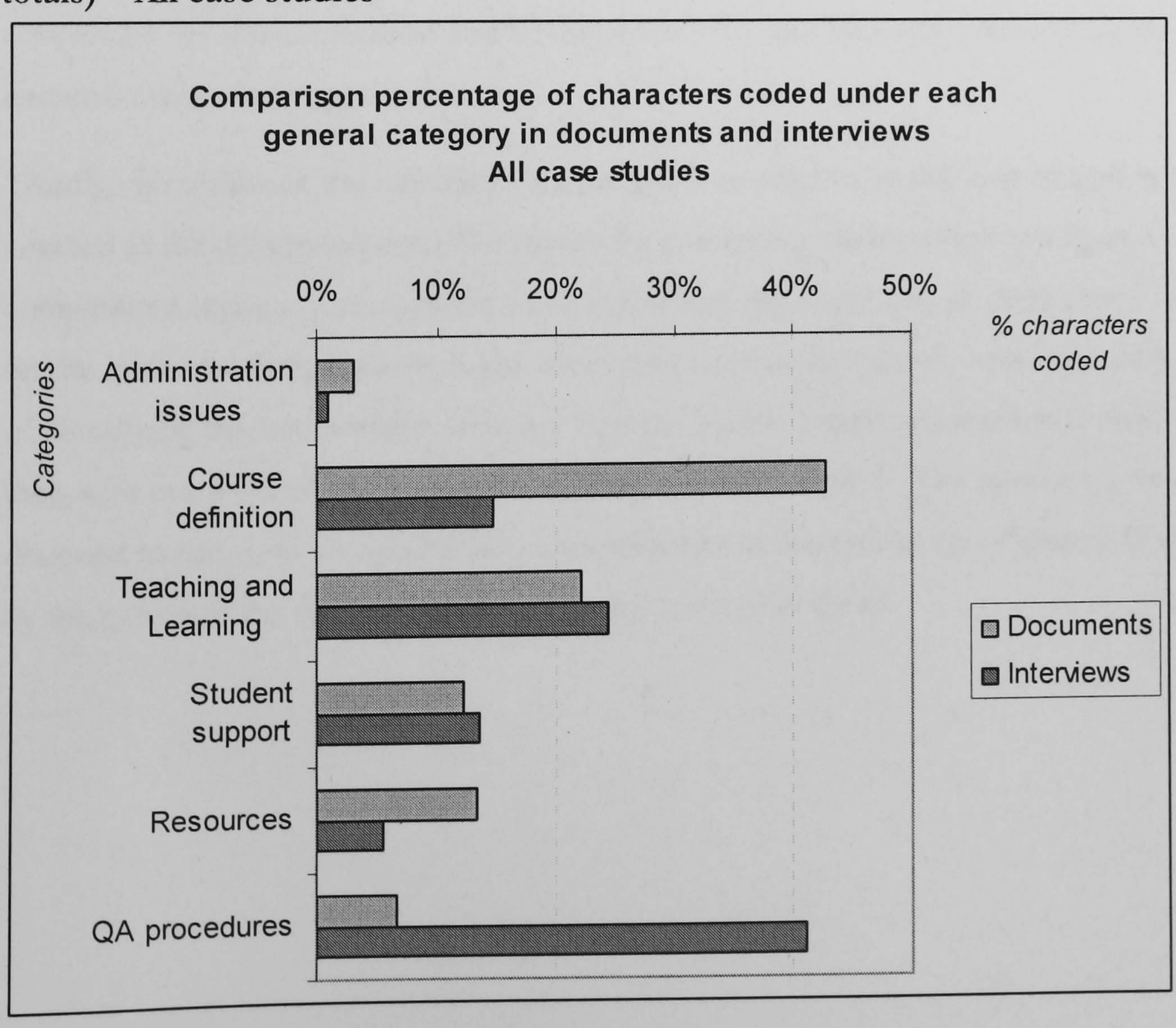
- To get the stakeholders' view of the courses under study. This account aimed to provide a contrasting perspective about the course when compared with the account from the documents, and in this way provide evidence of any eventual gap that might be occurring on the coverage of the quality assurance procedures.

- To get a better and deeper understanding of how some of the quality issues identified in the documentation were perceived by the stakeholders.

- To get a closer view on how the quality assurance procedures operated, identifying the main issues regarding their applicability, usability and benefit for the assurance and enhancement of quality in online courses.

The interviews were designed to cover specifically those issues that were not clear from the documentation and to focus extensively on the quality assurance procedures (as can be seen in Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 Comparison of percentage of characters coded under each general category in documents and interviews (in relation to documents' and interviews' totals) – All case studies



The strategy adopted for analysing the interviews was to compare the contents of the interviews with the content of the quality assurance documentation. Within each category in which the contents were coded (course definition, teaching and learning, student support and learning resources), the analysis focused on reviewing whether there were any new issues arising from the interviews that were not present in the documentation. This review aimed to map out the extent to which the quality assurance procedures in place in each of the courses under study were able to capture all the aspects of them.

In the following sections, the results obtained from the analysis of the documentation and interviews, and their comparison, are presented a case study at a time. Considering that the focus of this research study is the quality assurance procedures together with their effectiveness, the reporting of the results has been organised around three main parts:

Firstly, a brief introduction describing the main features of the course under study and of the quality assurance documentation gathered; the results of the analysis of these documents are reported, highlighting any patterns found and the overview of quality assurance issues covered by the documentation.

Secondly, the documents' account of the course is presented, mapping the quality issues covered by the documentation and linking them with specific contextual and institutional circumstances where appropriate.

Thirdly, the results of the interviews are presented in relation to the map of quality issues covered in the documentation. The reason for presenting the interview results as a comparative account – as opposed to an account of the interviews on their own – is based on the interview design selected. The interviews were designed and carried out with the aim of identifying the issues which were not covered by the documentation and in this sense, they were not planned to review the full array of course aspects. The interviews were also designed to focus on the quality assurance procedures themselves (see Figure 6.1) which, by the nature of the documentation, were not covered in detail.

Results Case Study 1

This case study was a postgraduate Master's level course that belongs to a higher education institution located in London. The programme was delivered fully online using a commercially available virtual learning environment. The course was first offered in September 2003. This programme had a parallel face-to-face version, but there was no mention in the documentation with regard to how similar both courses were, although they shared the same name.

Documentation in context

Comparing the quality assurance procedures' documentation gathered for this case study with the mechanisms suggested in the Quality Assurance Agency's Codes of Practice (QAA, 2000b; 2004a), there were only two types of documentation that could not be obtained: the validation documents and external examiners' reports.

This course had its own quality assurance policy in place, which added three further mechanisms: internal peer review meetings, tutor annual reports, and external assessor reports. Unfortunately no documentation could be obtained regarding these three procedures. This policy also specifies that student evaluations would be composed of the summaries of evaluation questionnaires; the transcripts of feedback postings; and correspondence and complaints.

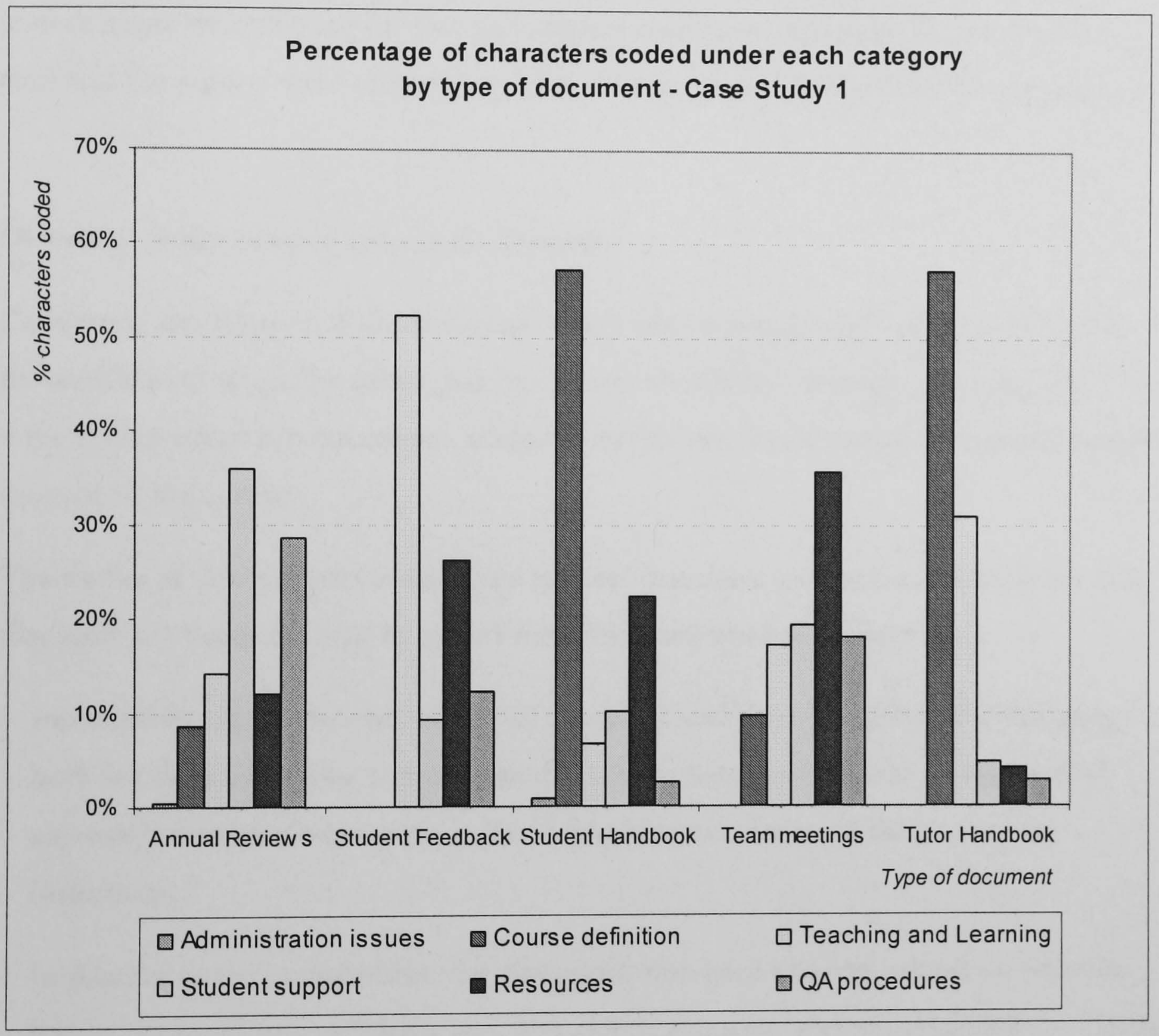
Despite the fact it was not possible to access all the documentation, those that were collected provided a fairly complete account of the course as they included two annual reviews (one internal and one from external assessors) that presented quite a complete account of the course.

Patterns observed in the documentation

Analysing the data from the point of view of the number of characters coded under each

category[6], overall the documentation presented a strong focus on 'Course definition' issues that covered almost half of the coded text (see Table 6.3). This high concentration of 'Course definition' issues was especially visible in the student and tutor handbooks (see Figure 6.2). This might be reasonable considering that these documents were meant to explain the course to students and tutors, and therefore they tended to be focused on describing the course objectives, curriculum and assessment.

Figure 6.2 Percentage of characters coded under each general category, by type of document – Case Study 1



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[6] As discussed in the methodology chapter, a section is defined as the piece of text (sentences, paragraphs) that satisfies the description given for each coding category. In determining how large it is, one particular coding was applied until it was no longer valid. The numerical analysis of the coded sections however is based on the number (and percentages) of characters included in each category, as only in this way was it possible to identify where the focal points of the documents were located.

In contrast, the annual review reports, student feedback reports and the team meeting minutes were focused on different issues (see Table 6.3). Annual review reports were found to be focused mostly on 'Student support' issues and the 'Quality assurance procedures'; student feedback reports were largely focused on 'Teaching and learning' issues, while the team meeting minutes were mostly concerned with course 'Resources'. It is interesting to note that student feedback reports contained references to four aspects only: more than half of their text revolved around 'Teaching methods', and the rest were related to 'Academic support', 'Facilities' and 'Module evaluations' (see Table 6.3). This concentrated pattern might be reflecting the fact that student comments had already been collated by staff and the reports were only stating what the team had considered relevant to include.

Overview of quality assurance issues in the documents

Comparing the content of the documents with what was expected – according to the theoretical map of quality issues that procedures should be covering (see Appendix Three), – the quality assurance documents analysed for this case study presented a rather complete account of the course.

The results of this comparative analysis indicate that there were some minor issues only that were not being covered by any of the documents analysed. These were:

- Intended learning outcomes were well described and clearly stated on the documents, both for the programme and each module; there were nevertheless no mention of external reference points, such as the QAA infrastructure or to the aims of the institution.

- In relation to the expectations, the documentation gave extensive detail on what the course expected from students and staff, describing roles and responsibilities for both. Only the expected time commitment of staff is not mentioned in any of the documents.

- Regarding the curriculum, the documents addressed this aspect at length but without making any reference to its relationship with the intended learning outcomes and/or its effectiveness at delivering them.

Table 6.3 Percentage of characters coded under each category by type of document (in relation to documents' totals) – Case Study 1

	Annual Reviews	Student Feedback	Student Handbook	Team meetings	Tutor Handbook	Totals
Administration issues	-	-	1%	-	-	1%
Course definition	9%	-	57%	10%	57%	46%
ILOs	3%	-	2%	-	9%	3%
Expectations	-	-	42%	-	31%	30%
Curriculum	4%	-	4%	-	7%	4%
Assessment	2%	-	10%	10%	11%	9%
Teaching and Learning	14%	52%	7%	17%	31%	13%
Student Capacity	2%	-	-	6%	-	1%
Staff Capacity	-	-	-	1%	23%	3%
Teaching Methods	8%	52%	6%	7%	6%	8%
Student Expectations	2%	-	-	2%	-	-
Student Achievement	2%	-	-	1%	2%	1%
Student support	36%	9%	10%	19%	5%	14%
Before Start Course	28%	-	-	7%	5%	6%
During Delivery	2%	-	8%	3%	-	5%
Academic support	2%	9%	2%	6%	-	2%
Accessibility-Equal Opportunities	3%	-	1%	3%	-	1%
Resources	12%	26%	23%	36%	4%	19%
Staff	1%	-	16%	6%	-	11%
Facilities	11%	26%	4%	24%	4%	7%
Delivery System	-	-	3%	6%	-	2%
QA procedures	29%	12%	3%	18%	3%	8%
External Examiners	1%	-	-	-	2%	-
Module Evaluation	9%	12%	1%	12%	-	3%
Stud Rep, complaints & appeals	-	-	1%	-	1%	1%
Annual Review	5%	-	-	-	-	1%
Other QA procedures	14%	-	-	6%	-	3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

- In relation to accessibility issues, the documentation revealed the concern staff members had regarding future developments. Also basic contact details were provided for students. Other issues that should have been included however, such as alternatives

teaching strategies or IT support for access, were not mentioned in any of the documents.

- In relation to the quality assurance procedures, the documents referred to a wide range of mechanisms, each mentioned with different levels of detail. Staff feedback and review of materials, whilst part of the course review strategies, were only indirectly referred to. One issue not mentioned was the feedback from former students and employers. The course had a system of e-buddies that relied on former and older students of the programme, but they were not mentioned as being a source of feedback for the course review process.

To explore the data from a different point of view, namely the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures themselves, the documents were analysed across time to see whether issues that emerged at any point were mentioned and addressed later at advanced stages of the quality assurance process. For this case study however, the identification of these issues was not exactly time-related as the documentation covered only a limited period of time.

Nevertheless, two issues were followed up, both of which were raised by students (although they were only reported on documents where student feedback was already collated by the course team). The first issue was the request made by students to have models of exam papers from the beginning of the academic year; this request was taken up by the course team and it was found recorded in the minutes of a course team meeting held in the middle of that year. In this minute the issue appeared as solved due to sample exam papers having been already posted for each module. The second issue investigated was the suggestion made by students for improved access to e-journals. This issue was taken up by the team who started to explore how this provision could be improved as library access was outside their immediate area of control. The issue was reviewed several times and mentioned in several reports, and after a year there was still no definitive solution reported.

A description of the course was composed using the information provided by all these documents. This account is presented in the following section.

Documents' account of the course – Case Study 1

Regarding the course definition, the documents gave a full description of the mission, aims and objectives of the programme and each component. This course was delivered fully

online and relied heavily on students' self-discipline to work on their own through the materials provided, and their participation in the collaborative online events organised within each module's units. In order to get the full involvement of students, expectations were clearly described and extensively explained in the student handbook, including giving detailed guidance for each type of activity that the course included (such as, academic writing, good essays, peer interactions, etc.), and even indicating such details as the minimum number of contributions that each student should make. A code of conduct and ground rules for participation were also made available for students.

Tutors were also a key factor in the success of the course, and the course provided a tutor handbook that complemented the information given in the student handbook. Expectations upon tutors were also expressed in detail, including descriptions of the roles of personal and module tutors, each of them with clearly separated tasks related to student support.

The curriculum of the course was organised around three awards: certificate, diploma and master's degree. The master's programme included four core modules, the first of which was prerequisite to complete the registration process. Students also needed to complete one optional module (from a choice of four) and one dissertation module (from a choice of three). The course was designed to be completed in three years, and students could take up to five years to finish it.

At the start of each module students received a study pack including the handbook, written materials, a CD with course materials (journal articles and book chapters) and text books. The virtual learning environment (VLE) was the online system within which all materials were available and where the teaching and learning activities took place (communication with peers and tutors, and collaborative activities). Although the materials were reportedly praised by the students, there were reports found of two issues mentioned by students: the need to review the quantity of reading materials in each unit and module to ensure consistency of workload, and the need to improve the extent to which the materials reflected the multi-disciplinary and international diversity of students. It is relevant to note here that the comments of students regarding the course were not read directly as they were submitted, but through the reports prepared by staff and which were based on the original student comments.

Other specific observations of students were recorded regarding the induction module. Students commented that the first unit of the induction module needed slower pacing,

clearer explanations of the tasks to be done and their deadlines, and better links between the activities and the objectives defined.

Regarding the collaborative online activities that students should engage in within each unit, the documents reported extensively on the concerns staff had about the limited student participation, especially the difficulties in achieving in-depth discussions. This issue was reported as resolved the following year, when a more active group of students was carrying out the same activities, leading staff to conclude that it was not only tutor facilitation that influenced the group participation, but also student and group characteristics.

Students were expected to dedicate an average of twelve to fifteen hours per week to their studies during term time. Each module lasted fourteen weeks and was divided into two to four study units. Each unit had a similar sequence of activities, starting with two or three weeks dedicated to individual reading and learning activities. This was followed by an online seminar during which students usually worked in small groups; finally the unit ended with some weeks dedicated to prepare and write up the unit assessment component. The only issue reported regarding workload was a comment made by one student indicating that the time allocated to the online activities was underestimated.

Modules were assessed by an essay-type piece of coursework plus an unseen written examination paper. The weighting ratio between components was an issue for the course team; the documents reported how the team applied for a more coursework oriented ratio as an exception, obtaining approval for a better balance in the end. Criteria for marking coursework were clearly stated, as well as the procedure on how to submit assignments. One aspect of the marking criteria which was not clearly explained however was the 10% of coursework mark which was allocated for 'satisfactory participation' in the online activities. An issue that appeared at some point was the team's concern regarding the turnaround times that tutors were taking to assess coursework. It is reported however that after analysis, the turnaround times were within their quality standard of twenty-one days. Plagiarism and cheating events were also clearly described and examples given, as well as the procedures and consequences entailed.

Regarding application and admission procedures the documentation reported problems of recruitment targets and late applications. Because of the low number of applications for the course, the programme had been forced to accept late applications, which had consequences later in the course, in that students were falling behind (due to incomplete

inductions or late receipt of materials). Across the documents analysed, this issue remained an unsolved problem as its solution was dependent on several marketing and administrative procedures which were outside the team's direct control. In order to improve the application procedure several strategies were attempted, including studying the possibility of moving the course to a calendar year timetable. Related to this issue was the problem of funding, which was continually mentioned as the major cause of students failing to complete registration or resulting in the suspension of their studies.

In relation to student support, the documentation provided a full review of the types and levels of support that students had access to. Specifically regarding academic support, students were offered two formal schemes plus other two complementary systems. The formal academic support was offered through personal and module tutors. Personal tutors were mostly related to overall support in academic matters, including personal or work-related issues that might be affecting student performance. Module tutors were focused on content-specific support, leading the online discussions and providing the formal feedback on assessment. The documentation reported high levels of student satisfaction with the support, feedback and tutor's swift responses. Tutors were perceived by students as being permanently available.

The other two support schemes were in the form of mentors and e-buddies. Mentors were not organised by the course; it was suggested that students could identify a close person (for example a colleague) with whom they could talk about their student experiences and get assistance. E-buddies, unlike mentors, were organised by the course team. The system was made up of a network of former and older students of the programme who were paired with first-year students to provide informed advice during their study time. This scheme was put in place after being suggested by students. There were no evaluation comments recorded regarding these two schemes, and there was no strategy in place to get mentors' or buddies' feedback on the course.

In relation to course resources, staff members were reported in the annual reviews as being highly committed to the course and a full account of their expertise and experience was provided for students in the handbook. Additionally they mentioned several staff development activities as being planned. The documents reported very briefly on the workload of staff. Of particular note, the decision of the team to reject any additional projects until course activities settled down was mentioned, but details on the origins of such a decision were not provided.

The documentation also reported issues on access to library resources and to course materials. In relation to the library, the documents mentioned the problem of limited access to e-journals, bookshops and local libraries, as it was an issue students had complained about earlier. Although still unresolved, the team was considering the possibility of extending the collection of readings sent out to students to reduce their access problems. In relation to course materials, the documents reported of dispatch problems and delays for some modules.

Regarding the quality assurance procedures, the documentation showed one main issue related to the student feedback strategies. One of the strategies in place was a formal questionnaire sent out to students at the end of each unit and module. The documents reported that this survey was originally sent out to students by email by the course administrator at the end of each unit but the response rate was very low. In order to improve the level of response, the team decided first that the questionnaire would be sent out by module tutors rather than the administrator. This strategy had also failed to raise the response rates, and hence for the following year, according to the documents, the survey had been made compulsory for students and they would not be allowed to continue working on the next unit until they had completed the evaluation. The results of this new approach on the level of response were not reported. It is interesting to note nevertheless that the team had not reviewed the features of the questionnaire itself or seen it as a possible cause of the lack of responses. The questionnaire had twelve open-ended generic questions, eight of them related to the unit and four to the tutoring, which could be regarded as quite a heavy load considering that it was sent to every student after each unit; as some modules could have up to four units, this meant that students may have ended up having to answer it almost every three weeks.

Comparative account for Case Study 1

Comparing the data gathered through the interviews and the quality assurance documents for this case study, it appears that the differences between the two accounts are not significant. The quality issues followed up in the documents were corroborated by the interviewees and only some specific opinions from the students were revealed as new in the interviews, which are presented below.

There was one major gap between the information gathered from both sets of data, and it

was related to the students' understanding of how the assessment on participation was carried out. In the documentation it was clearly stated that students needed to contribute a minimum number of postings to get the 10% of the mark. However, the documents were not explicit in describing how this 10% of the mark was going to be allocated. From the interviews (and confirmed by the survey applied to students) it was possible to conclude that students perceived this system as a grey area, indicating that they really did not know exactly how their participation was assessed. Interestingly staff interviewed had a very clear idea of how it worked. Remarkably, the staff were all in agreement in their understanding of the 10% being seen as a fine for non-participation in online activities, rather than an assessment of their participation. Despite their agreement in the way this 10% was applied, this explanation had not yet been passed to the students, who were still confused about this aspect of the assessment procedure.

Regarding the teaching and learning aspects of the course, the interviews provided confirmation and further explanations of the views presented in the documentation, particularly in relation to the quality of the materials, the student workload, the international diversity of materials and the levels of participation observed. Three new issues appeared which were mentioned by students and were not present in the documents. The first one was the students' feelings about their difficulties in getting used to the online environment at the start of the course, mainly because of the amount of message reading and writing that the online working involved. The second issue, related to the level of participation, was a concern expressed by students, facilitated by being online, about fellow participants who just disappeared and did not participate. Although students agreed that the level of participation in the online environment was good, they considered this disappearance as a risk for the quality of what they were getting out of the online discussions. A similar concern was expressed by one tutor; in his view the quality of the online discussions was not at risk because of the failure to participate of some students, but due to the low number of students enrolled in the courses. The third issue pointed out by one student and also brought up in the survey, was the students' perception of the online discussions as of better quality when the tutor had specified clear objectives, while other discussions seemed rather aimless, and hence less useful. Despite this comment, students were satisfied with the course in general, as it was as flexible as they were expecting.

In relation to student support, the interviews revealed some feedback from staff regarding the e-buddies and mentoring systems, which was not mentioned in the documents.

Specifically regarding e-buddies, the perception of staff was that this support, although available for students, was not used by them. This view was consistent with students' statements regarding this support scheme.

Regarding the learning resources in the course, interviewees fully confirmed the issues mentioned in the documents: the difficulties accessing e-journals and some problems in the dispatch of materials.

Summary

The above account suggests that in this case study the aspects not captured by the quality assurance mechanisms in place were few. However, most of these gaps were concerned with student perceptions and concerns, which were not mentioned in any of the quality assurance documents. Overall, and comparing staff accounts with those from student given in the interviews, it seems that staff accounts of the course are particularly consistent with the account provided by the documentation.

This may be suggesting that beyond the wide range of quality assurance procedures in place, the documentation reporting on their application was mainly recording the tutors' views on the course, leaving student concerns unregistered.

Results Case Study 2

This case study was a postgraduate certificate course offered by a higher education institution located in London. The programme started in 2002 and used a virtual learning environment developed by the institution.

Documentation in context

The documents obtained for this case study represented all the internal quality assurance procedures in place in the institution in which this course was based. The only documentation not available was the tutor handbook.

The course was delivered by an institution that had a well described quality assurance policy and procedures. The procedures related to programme level were: course approval, annual course reviews, external examiner reports, student feedback, and student performance data. Also, all courses were required to provide students with a handbook, updated annually according to predefined guidelines, and to follow the procedures for the planning, development and evaluation of course materials.

In this programme student feedback was gathered through an online questionnaire that students completed at the end of each module. The institution had a standard form for student feedback that programmes could adapt. In addition, the course had an external examiner who delivered a report once a year (through the completion of a form) based on the information provided by the course team. The annual course review was carried out by the course team based on institutional guidance, the information gathered throughout the year in their team meetings, plus the input of the student feedback forms and external examiners reports. For this case study the validation documents included the original document submitted for the initial approval of the course and the documentation reporting two later changes carried out in two different modules.

There was one additional procedure at course level that was the 'periodic review' designed to review the fitness for purpose of the programme. This procedure would normally be applied every five years (or more frequently, if needed) to renew the programme approval or if it was considered necessary. The course under study had not yet been under periodic review.

Table 6.4 Percentage of characters coded under each category by type of document (in relation to documents' totals) – Case Study 2

	Module evaluation	Validation	Annual Reviews	External Examiners	Student Handbook	Team meetings	Totals
Administration issues	-	2%	3%	-	5%	1%	2%
Course definition	-	80%	30%	40%	54%	21%	48%
ILOs	-	13%	1%	1%	3%	-	5%
Expectations	-	15%	-	-	16%	-	9%
Curriculum	-	35%	23%	-	21%	14%	21%
Assessment	-	17%	6%	39%	14%	6%	13%
Teaching and Learning	92%	4%	37%	47%	11%	19%	29%
Student Capacity	5%	-	11%	-	-	1%	2%
Staff Capacity	-	-	4%	4%	-	2%	1%
Teaching Methods	14%	4%	11%	3%	6%	3%	7%
Student Expectations	50%	-	1%	-	-	4%	9%
Student Achievement	23%	1%	10%	39%	5%	9%	9%
Student support	7%	4%	21%	1%	16%	38%	11%
Before Start Course	-	2%	18%	-	3%	27%	5%
During Delivery	2%	2%	2%	-	10%	11%	4%
Academic support	5%	1%	1%	1%	2%	-	2%
Accessibility-Equal Opportunities	-	-	-	-	2%	-	-
Resources	1%	9%	7%	-	13%	14%	8%
Staff	-	-	7%	-	-	8%	1%
Facilities	1%	9%	-	-	3%	1%	4%
Delivery System	-	-	-	-	9%	4%	3%
QA procedures	-	-	2%	12%	2%	7%	2%
External Examiners	-	-	-	11%	1%	-	1%
Module Evaluation	-	-	1%	-	-	2%	-
StudRep, complaints & appeals	-	-	-	-	1%	2%	-
Annual Review	-	-	1%	-	-	-	-
Other QA procedures	-	-	-	1%	-	3%	-
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

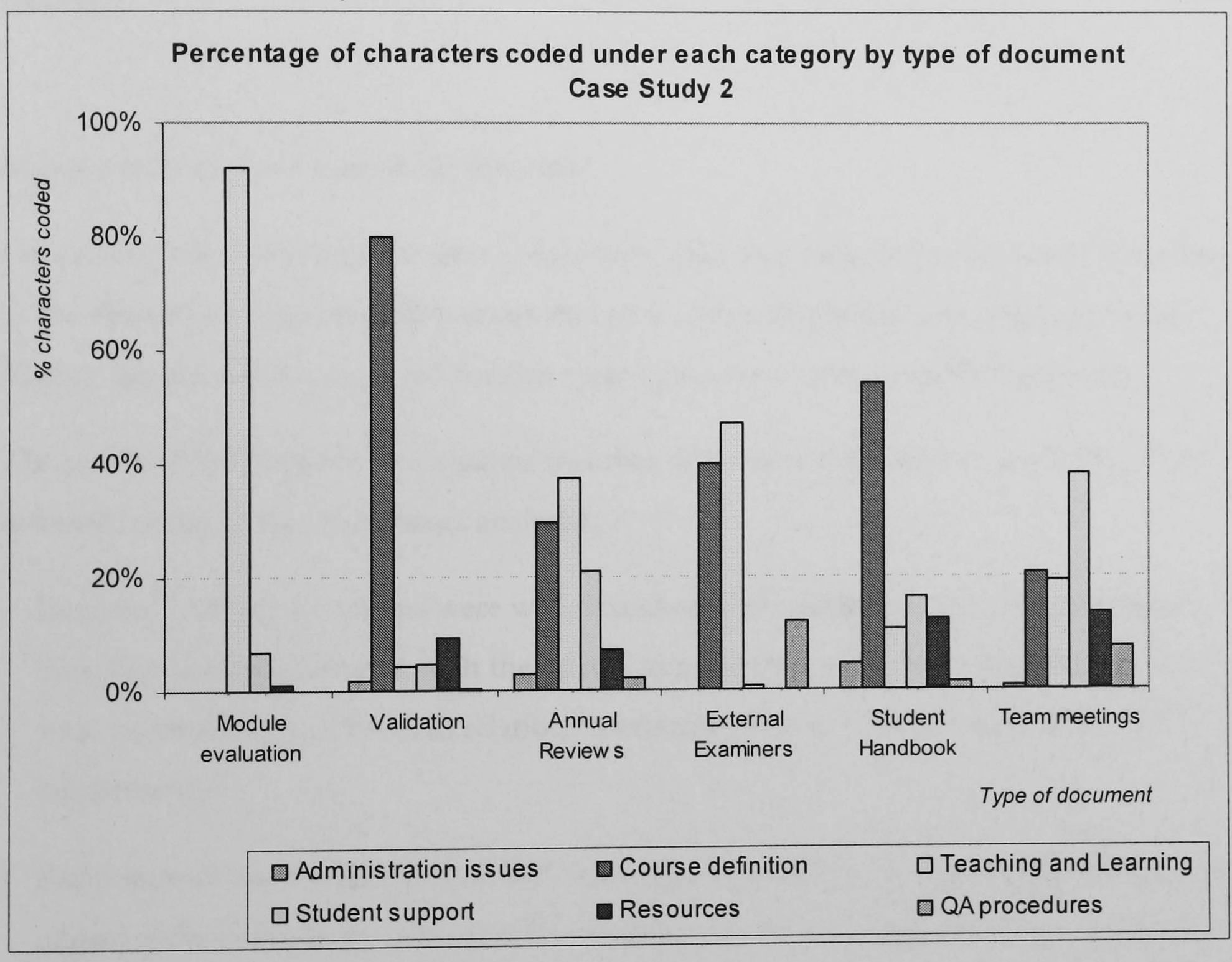
Patterns observed in the documentation

In the analysis of the documents, the overall focus on 'Course definition' issues was highlighted, as can be seen in Table 6.4. The documents that presented the highest

concentration of characters in one category were module evaluations; more than 90% of the texts coded in these documents referred to 'Teaching and Learning' issues. Annual reviews and external examiners reports also concentrated on the 'Teaching and learning' aspects of the course, the latter being especially focused on 'Student achievement'.

'Course definition' issues were concentrated within the validation documents, as well as in the student handbook. In contrast, team meeting minutes documents were mainly focused on 'Student support' issues (see Figure 6.3).

Figure 6.3 Percentage of characters coded under each general category, by type of document – Case Study 2



Analysing the data across time to verify whether issues raised at any point were addressed in later stages of the quality assurance process, there was one issue that had an interesting pattern in the documentation. The module evaluation reports for this case study were received in aggregated form for the last three years, so it was not possible to identify when exactly an issue was brought up by students. Despite this, it was possible to identify one student complaint, regarding the lack of peer interaction, present in the reports for most of the modules. This issue was next picked up by the annual review team for the second year

of the programme, as a response to the comment made by the external examiner, who had pointed out the struggle of students to establish relevant communications among them. The annual review report however confined the issue to one specific module, taking up immediate action by presenting a redesign of the activities for that module, in order to improve the support given to students in building up their interactions. Considering the timescale, it would be possible to establish that the issue was raised by students in the module evaluation during the second year. It is, however, interesting that the team meeting minutes during that second year did not present any record of this issue even though student representatives were participating and giving feedback to staff members in the meetings.

Map of quality assurance issues in the documents

Contrasting the content of the documents with what was expected to be found according to the theoretical map of quality issues that procedures should be covering (Appendix Three), the documents analysed for this course present a rather complete account.

The result of this comparative analysis was that there were nevertheless some issues not covered by any of the documents analysed:

- Intended learning outcomes were well-described and clearly stated on the documents, including their relationship with the overall aims of the institution. Nevertheless there were no references to them in relation to external reference points such as the QAA infrastructure.

- Expectations upon students and staff were clear and well explained, detailing roles and responsibilities for both. Only time commitment from staff was not mentioned in any of the documents.

- Regarding accessibility issues, the documents only presented a general statement about the institution's commitment to equality of opportunities, making it explicit that this issue was part of the content of the programme. Despite this declaration, issues like accessible electronic information and materials, alternative teaching strategies or IT support for access were not mentioned in any of the documents.

- In relation to the assessment procedures and criteria, information for students and staff was quite complete with the exception of the results release strategy, which was not

mentioned in any of the documents; there was no mention of the time allocated for preparation for assessment.

- The background information about staff presented to students was minimal, just a few general comments regarding their experience and qualifications.

- In relation to the quality assurance procedures, the documents referred to the whole range of procedures in place in the university, including plans to survey alumni. There was however one aspect that was not clear: staff feedback. It seemed to be part of the strategies in place, as tutors' opinions were included in the annual review reports, but the way the feedback was gathered was not clearly stated.

A description of this course was built using the information provided by all these documents. This account is presented in the following section.

Documents' account of the course – Case Study 2

This programme was delivered by a combination of fully online and mixed-mode modules. The programme comprised three core and three optional modules. In order to obtain the certificate students needed to successfully complete all core and one optional modules. There were two exit routes along the way leading to the certificate; and it was also possible to use the certificate credits for a further degree. The certificate was designed to be completed in one year, but students were usually taking two years to complete the programme. The maximum registration time was three years. Each module was free-standing and modules could be taken in a different order than the one suggested. Each module ran over a fifteen-week semester requiring ten hours of study per week.

All core and one of the optional modules were delivered online, though the first core module could also be taken in a blended version of face-to-face workshops followed up by online activities. The other two optional modules were delivered in blended-mode as well, as a series of face-to-face and online workshops. Each semester, the programme also organised two optional face-to-face sessions: one just before the start of the module and one halfway through the semester.

The course curriculum had been through various changes along its life. Amongst them were: the changes made to the credit ratings to allow modules to feed into further awards within the school; the creation of the blended version of the first core module and its

validation as equivalent to the online version; and several other content and assessment adjustments carried out in response to external examiner and student feedback.

The programme had clearly stated aims and outcomes, as well as a rationale that explained the background of the course. Supporting this, expectations on students were well described, including detailed entry requirements that incorporated a self-evaluation ICT profile that prospective students needed to complete and submit as part of their application.

Students' attendance at the workshops was required (when registered in blended modules) and they were expected to connect to the virtual learning environment at least two to three times per week, suggested as the minimum frequency to maintain their presence. Students were also advised on what it meant to be a virtual learner, including a detailed explanation of the challenges that they would be facing.

As for the expectations upon tutors, the documentation was also very explicit. Module tutors and personal tutors were expected to keep in contact with students permanently, including not only online contact, but also phone and face-to-face meetings when required. To organise this support, the programme had developed a set of guidelines for tutors to follow regarding their own preparation and the expected timing of contacts they should maintain with their students. The student evaluation results confirmed the guidelines were followed by tutors as students stated their full satisfaction with the quality of their interaction with tutors, highlighting their crucial role in supporting them to complete the modules. External examiner reports also mentioned this area as a high quality feature of the course. It is interesting to note that although this interaction was valued by the tutors themselves, they also recognised the heavy workload the tutor role implied, leaving them with little extra time for other activities, such as research. This overload was also mentioned in relation to the situation where the programme leader had to act as module and personal tutor, and the administrative tasks that tutors had to take on because the team did not have an administrator. Although the number of staff members increased in the first two years, work overload was still an issue that continued to appear in later reports.

Course staff however had been able to expand the activities of the programme through: the publication of papers; presenting at conferences; organising a regional conference on the topic of the course; and attending academic events to keep up to date, demonstrating in this way their high commitment and involvement. This high profile of staff academic activity contrasted nevertheless with the absence of information about their expertise and

background in the programme documentation.

Regarding assessment, the programme presented a wide range of assessment methods across the different modules, each of them described in detail in the documentation, including assessment criteria and marking procedures. As an indication of the level of appropriateness of the assessment methods, it was interesting to note that most students of all modules considered the assessment strategies to be professionally relevant for them, which was also mentioned in the external examiner reports. The programme also developed an online system for assessment submission that provided the course with the security required. According to the external examiner, student achievements were of a high standard. Students' perception of their own achievement was also satisfactory: according to their own feedback they were satisfied with their learning although an important proportion of students (40% to 80% depending on the module) considered they would need further training to feel totally confident in their skills.

In relation to the teaching methods, each module was organised around a series of tasks that included both individual and collaborative group-based activities, some of them being highly structured while others were more open. All the materials for each module were online. Student feedback regarding the activities was very positive, describing the online tasks as challenging and relevant, although they also commented on the lack of time to finish them properly, and the difficulties involved in collaboration, which was confirmed by the high level of dissatisfaction with peer interaction observed across the different module evaluations. This was also noticed by the external examiner for one particular module. This comment was taken up by the course team and the module was modified to scaffold team collaboration more explicitly. It was interesting to note that although students were dissatisfied, some also recognised in their comments that their lack of interaction with peers was actually a personal choice due to time pressure. It seemed here that staff tended to have higher expectations of students regarding their ability to interact with peers, without realising the real time demand that this activity implied. Additional to the review of the module activities, the course team decided to start advising students to take only one module per semester as a way to minimise the work overload and its consequent effect on deferrals and non-submissions.

Student support was well organised through a one-stop shop for all staff and students which was well advertised. Nevertheless module and personal tutors seemed to have always been the first point of contact for all queries, including technical difficulties with the virtual

learning environment. As mentioned above, tutors' performance was positively evaluated by students. The documentation mentioned however the difficulties encountered in the registration and progression monitoring processes that were not reliable enough to develop a student retention strategy. This led the course team to approach the registry team in order to solve the issue, as well as to plan the creation of an online application system. Regarding accessibility issues, the programme did not present any special arrangements; students were referred to the institution-wide contact details.

Concerning the learning environment, students were receiving detailed guidelines on how to access it and how to work on it. According to the documentation, it seemed that the system worked without major disruptions as any comments by students or staff were recorded. When some improvements were made, like the online submission system, they were properly planned and tested, including contingency plans.

The documentation presented brief information about the quality assurance procedures. Roles and tasks of external examiners were explicit, module evaluation surveys were collected online and in the face-to-face events, the collection of alumni feedback was planned, and student representatives' feedback was gathered in the team meetings. However, staff feedback was not formally collected.

Comparative account for Case Study 2

Overall the interviewees presented a consistent account when compared with the documentation analysed. There were however, some interesting issues raised by the interviewees that were not covered by the quality assurance documents, mostly regarding student and staff perceptions.

The first issue raised by students was related to the assessment strategy. Students interviewed stated they did not think it was fair that students that were not participating in the online activities were passing the modules anyway. The students completing the survey also agreed with this view. Although there was no indication in the documentation that would have led students to think participation was compulsory, this issue may be linked to the high level of expectations that tutors had upon student participation.

The documentation reviewed presented a very detailed description of what was meant by being a virtual learner and the minimum participation required from students. Staff

interviewed nevertheless suggested that in their view, students were not clear on how to tackle the online work (usually falling behind, missing deadlines, etc.). This perception was particularly evident when commenting on the expected level of participation in the online environment, where staff recognised they did have over- expectations that made them feel disappointed most of the time. Since students were frequently being asked for more involvement and participation, it may be reasonable to expect that students would have liked to see their efforts rewarded by not allowing non-participants to pass the modules.

Another interesting difference found on this issue was the explanation given for this perceived low level of participation. According to staff, the main barrier for student participation was time, which matched the data in the documents. The students however had a different view. They did not consider time was the main barrier. Students did think that it was a commitment issue and some even regarded collaboration tasks as very difficult, which would explain why people just did 'not turn up'. Interestingly students interviewed and surveyed agreed on the heavy workload the modules meant to them, but when asked specifically for a reason why participation in the online activities was low, they mainly explained it as a result of people's lack of commitment. Regardless of their differences on the causes for low participation, both students and staff agreed that participation would improve if they knew each other better, which did not seem to have a direct relation to the causes suggested.

In reviewing these points of view, it seemed that students felt the 'non-participation' phenomenon was a personal decision, based not on lack of time but as a direct response to the difficulties of collaborating in groups. Collaborative tasks were perceived as hard work, and hence being the major cause for the lack of communication and participation. When asked specifically in the survey whether collaborative activities that did not work well had created friction and lack of communication, the majority of the respondents were in agreement. Bearing in mind this assumption, it is possible to understand why knowing each other personally could have been considered as the main way to improve participation.

In the area of support for students, the issue of participation was raised again from a different angle, this time related to the attendance at the induction and the half-term events. Staff considered these face-to-face events key for getting people started and getting to know each other. The problem was that students were not attending them. Inductions were attended by an average of 40% of students and half term meetings by even fewer people. Staff had the view that students wanted them, and students even asked for more

face-to-face contact, but there was a tension because in the end students were not attending these events in large numbers.

A second issue regarding support for students was the relationship of the programme with the institution-wide systems. The documents mentioned the difficulties the course team was facing with registration and progression monitoring processes that had led them to create their own online application procedure. The interviews clarified that this was not the case; the course team only put an 'interest in registration form' in place online, but the actual registration was still processed through the institutional channels. Registration was evidently a major problem for the team and for the course, as the institution-wide system was not working well – students were registered on the wrong courses, several weeks after the start of the course, or documentation was going missing – impacting on the quality of the students' relationship with the institution as a whole and with the programme in particular. The team had then decided to move their administrative procedures away from the centrally managed processes, as they felt they did not have any power to improve these processes. Registration was one of the few processes that the course team still had to operate through the institution, but they had moved away from other institution-wide mechanisms and had organised their own procedures for admissions and submission of assignments, amongst others.

An example of this separation was the fact that within the validation documentation it was stated that students would get support through an institution-wide office especially dedicated to support e-learners. When asked, students did not know what it was, as the course team had also moved away from that facility to provide all the support directly to the students. The facilities used for the face-to-face meetings were also an issue for the course team, which were not mentioned in the quality assurance documentation reviewed. Access to rooms and network availability were also a problem. Interestingly the view of staff was that the solution was not in their hands, and that the only way to proceed was to move away from the institution's procedures and to create course specific processes.

Summary

From the comparison of the two sets of data presented above it seems that the quality assurance documentation was able to capture most of the aspects and issues related with the course delivery; it highlights however a rather important difference in the views of staff

and students regarding those issues. An example would be the reasons given for the low levels of participation observed: the views of staff given in the annual reviews were officially recorded the documentation; the student views recorded in the module evaluations were not taken up.

This example shows a mismatch between student and staff views, which could eventually influence the effectiveness of any action taken to improve this situation, and hence affecting the enhancement capacity of the procedures. In this sense, it could be suggested that, although the module evaluations were a procedure in place and owned by the course staff, they were only being used to demonstrate they had applied the mechanism, but not using its content to 'enlighten' the course team (Barnett, 1994b).

Results Case Study 3

This case study was a postgraduate master's degree course offered by a higher education institution based in London. The programme started being offered in September 2003, and it used a virtual learning environment developed by an associated institution.

Documentation in context

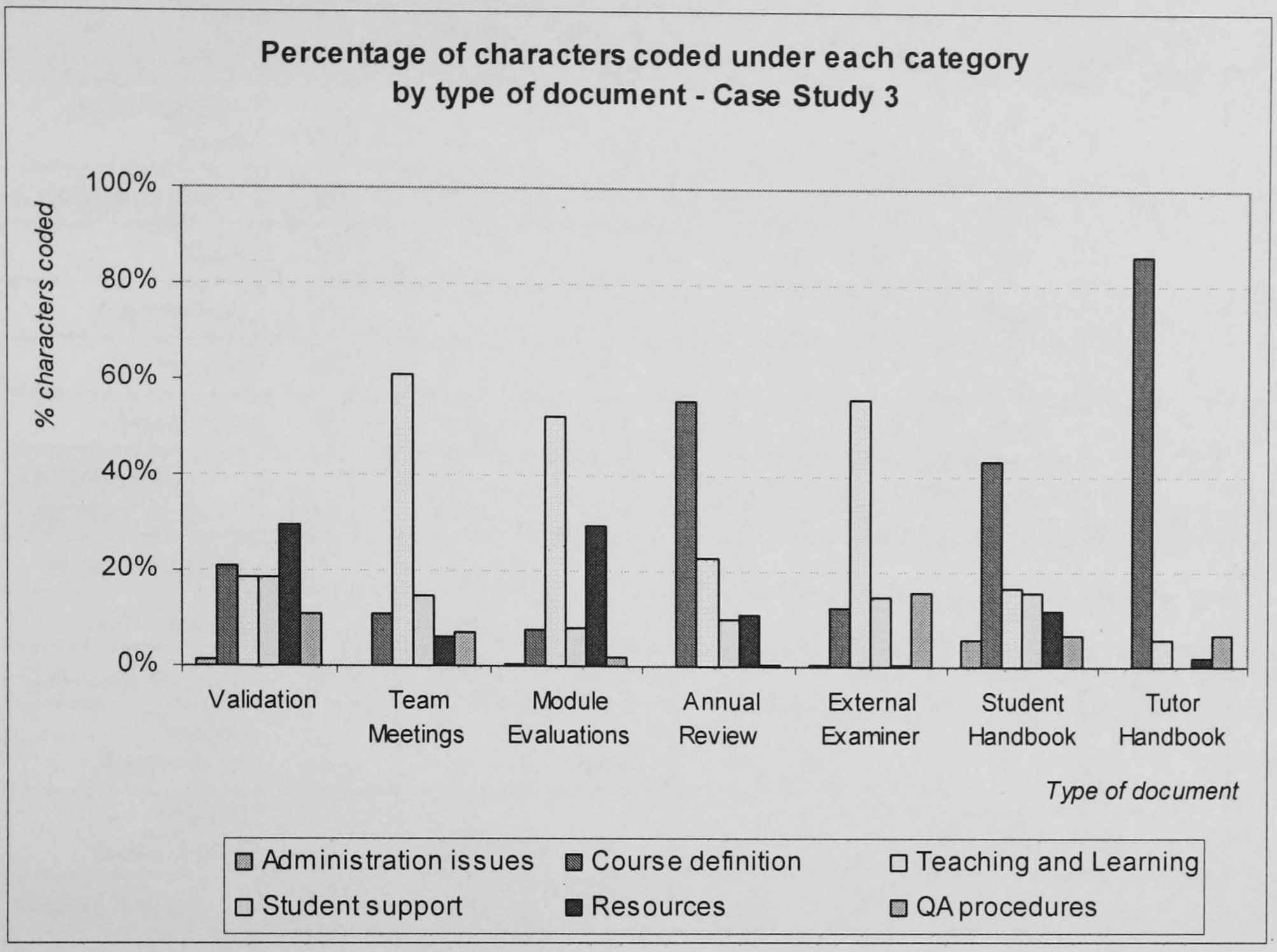
The documentation gathered for this case study seemed to be complete in relation to the quality assurance procedures that were in place at the institution which offers this course.

From the information provided in the documentation, the procedures in place were: course validation, module evaluation, external examiner reports and annual review reports. Among the documents obtained, there was no inclusion of any formal results of the module evaluation questionnaire that seemed to be in place; the course leader confirmed later that it was never applied to the students. The course team however carried out several other processes through which they gathered a useful amount of student feedback. It is worth observing the intensive scrutiny of the programme regarding its validation, which included detailed reports from internal and external advisers.

Patterns observed in the documentation

Analysing the data from the point of view of the number of characters coded in each category, the documentation presented a strong focus overall on 'Course definition' issues, which was especially evident in the tutor handbook, the annual review reports and in the student handbook (see Figure 6.4). In contrast, team meeting minutes, module evaluations and external examiner's reports were mostly focused on 'Teaching and learning' aspects, while the validation documentation showed a more homogeneous distribution of the coded texts across all the categories, with 'Resources' issues foremost.

Figure 6.4 Percentage of characters coded under each general category, by type of document – Case Study 3



Observing the results of the coding in more detail, it was noticeable that in those documents where the focus was on the teaching and learning aspects, the content was mainly concentrated on issues regarding 'Teaching methods', which was particularly evident on the external examiner reports (see Table 6.5). On the other hand, student and tutor handbooks were focused on describing 'Expectations'. This was particularly acute in the tutor handbook, where almost 90% of its content was related to 'Expectations'.

To explore the data from the point of view of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures themselves, the documents were analysed across time to see whether issues that emerged at any point where eventually mentioned and addressed later in the advanced stages of the quality assurance process. For this case study however, the identification of these issues was not accurately time-related as the documentation covered a very limited timeframe and some of the documents were not dated.

Table 6.5 Percentage of characters coded under each category by type of document (in relation to documents' totals) – Case Study 3

	Validation	Team Meetings	Module Evaluation	Annual Review	External Examiner	Student Handbook	Tutor Handbook	Total
Administration issues	1%	-	-		1%	6%		3%
Course definition	21%	11%	8%	56%	13%	43%	86%	33%
ILOs	5%				1%	1%	-	1%
Expectations	9%		4%	55%	1%	30%	86%	23%
Curriculum	2%	2%	1%	-	-	2%	-	2%
Assessment	5%	9%	3%	1%	11%	9%	-	7%
Teaching and Learning	19%	61%	52%	23%	56%	17%	6%	28%
Student Capacity	-	4%	9%	2%	-	-	-	2%
Staff Capacity	-	16%	3%	4%	-	-	-	2%
Teaching Methods	17%	39%	25%	10%	53%	15%	6%	20%
Student Expectations	-	-	14%	-	-	-	-	3%
Student Achievement	1%	2%	2%	6%	3%	1%	-	2%
Student support	19%	15%	8%	10%	15%	16%	-	13%
Before Start Course	1%	1%	1%	9%	-	-	-	1%
During Delivery	6%	-	2%	-	6%	10%	-	6%
Academic support	6%	14%	5%	1%	6%	4%	-	5%
Accessibility-Equal Opportunities	6%	-	-	-	3%	1%	-	1%
Resources	29%	6%	30%	11%	-	12%	2%	17%
Staff	1%	3%	-	4%	-	7%	-	4%
Facilities	6%	1%	1%	-	-	4%	-	3%
Delivery System	22%	3%	28%	6%	-	1%	2%	10%
QA procedures	11%	7%	2%	1%	16%	7%	7%	7%
External Examiners	1%	-	-	-	7%	-	-	-
Module Evaluation	-	-	-	1%	-	-	-	-
Stud Rep, complaints & appeals	1%	-	-	-	-	4%	-	2%
Annual Review	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other QA procedures	9%	7%	1%	-	8%	2%	7%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Despite this difficulty, three issues were identified and followed up across the documents. These three issues were pinpointed by staff in a report about student issues. In this report student concerns about the course were listed and described in detail. The issues identified were: students' discontent with the virtual learning environment; their complaint about the quality of the study materials; and their request for tutor support outside of office hours as most of them were studying mainly during the weekends.

The first issue, related to the VLE, was mentioned several times in the documents, including team meetings minutes and annual reviews. This indicated that the issue was considered seriously by the team who did try to provide solutions for the difficulties of highest importance which the VLE was presenting for the students.

Students were highly dissatisfied with the quality of the materials as they seemed to contain too many errors and some of parts were incomplete. This issue was also taken up by the team as they had to recognise the mistakes made in their quality review of the materials. The documentation showed that this issue was mentioned in team meeting minutes and annual reviews and which was also where the steps taken to resolve the problem were described.

Finally, the request made by students for more permanent support from tutors, was interestingly not mentioned again. The redefinition of tutor roles carried out could be seen as a response to this request, although the reason for taking this decision was not directly related to the specific request made by students.

Map of quality assurance issues present in the documents

Comparing the content of the documents to the list of theoretical aspects that –according to the literature (see Appendix Three) – should be covered, the documentation for this course presented a rather uneven picture.

The result of this analysis was that there were many aspects of the course that were not covered by the documents:

- Intended learning outcomes were well described but they did not make any references to external reference points such as the QAA infrastructure or the overall aims of the institution.

- With regard to the curriculum, it was noted that the course was only generally described in the student handbook, with no specific information on the course modules. The document that contained most of the information about the curriculum was the course specification, which was not intended to be read by students.

- Accessibility issues for disabled students were well considered in the design of the course materials, and it was described in detail. The information to students however did not contain any major references to accessibility issues.

- It was probably due to the fact that all modules were assessed solely by written examination, that the information provided to students and staff regarding: the adequacy of the assessment in relation to the learning outcomes; the criteria by which the exams were to be marked; and issues like plagiarism and cheating were not covered in the documentation.

- Other issues not mentioned in the documents were those related to recruitment strategies, promotional materials and admission processes. As the course team was not directly in charge of these processes, and considering also that the course had not had any trouble reaching its recruitment targets, the absence of this information may be reasonable.

A description of the course was composed using the information taken from all of these documents. This account is presented in the following section.

Documents' account of the course – Case Study 3

This master's course was delivered fully online and it mirrored the on-campus version. The programme included four core modules, five optional modules (from which students needed to complete two), and a final dissertation. Students could take two to four years to complete the programme. Each module lasted thirty-five weeks which corresponded to the academic session from September to May.

Module materials were organised around units, normally eleven per module. The structure of the course curriculum emulated the on-campus version, which was the main argument for all the design decisions taken on the course. The programme documentation was very explicit in informing students that the online course was actually 'the same' as the on campus course, only delivered differently. With this aim in mind, the materials included in

each unit were meant to be equivalent to one three-hour face-to-face lecture.

The information contained in the documentation about the learning outcomes, curriculum and assessment was very general and did not describe the objectives and contents for each module, probably because of this assumed equivalence between the online and on-campus courses. Course definition issues were mostly related to the origins of the course, its distinctive features and the extensive experience of the institution in this area of study.

Assessment of each module was based solely on a final exam at the end of the academic year, with the exception of the dissertation that was assessed by a combination of exam and the dissertation itself. The exams for the online modules were based on the exams applied to the face-to-face version of the course. This assessment strategy seemed to put a great strain on the students, some of whom explicitly asked tutors to introduce more assessment elements in the course in order that they would have more formal feedback before the examination. Interestingly, the answer from the course team was that if the online course wanted to keep the same standard of the face-to-face version – which is also assessed solely by examination – they could not change it. However, there was a difference in the assessment of the two courses: exams in the online course were one per module (instead of one exam per two modules in the face-to-face course) and included a fifteen minute reading time at the start. The reading time was finally suspended after the external examiner considered it was an unfair advantage to the online learners over the on-campus students.

In the documentation reporting student feedback and staff responses, the course team appeared to be stressing the opportunities for formative assessment offered to students on the course. In particular, students were strongly encouraged to submit answers to exam questions to be commented by the tutors, as they thought this was a more appropriate support for a master's level course. Despite student concerns regarding the examination, their exam results at the end of the first year showed they had got very high marks, and which were better than those of the on-campus students.

One other assessment element challenged by students was the assessment of the first module of the programme, which included the exam plus a self-assessment report of their online contribution, which counted for 5% of the final mark. This was the only instance in the programme where online participation was made compulsory. The reason for the team to introduce this element in the first module was to encourage students to participate in the online activities so that they would be able to experiment with the online element and appreciate its benefits. In all other modules, online participation was strongly encouraged

although it remained optional.

The documentation described in detail the expectations which the course placed upon students and tutors. The time requirement for students was extensively explained; a refined weighting system was in place, where each unit had an associated weight indicator, representing the amount of study time involved. Normally each unit was equivalent to three hours of study, although it was stressed that the time spent on each unit would normally exceed this amount as units included not only the content, but also tasks, exercises and further readings. On average, each module involved 175 to 180 hours of study. Overall students on the programme were required to study a minimum of twenty hours per week. Expectations of tutors were also very well described. Tutor roles, responsibilities and tasks were described in detail, although across all the documents there were only a few comments regarding the time involved.

The course had a sophisticated tutorial system based on three roles. Each module had a leader, one or more distance learning assistants, and tutors. The module leader was mainly an academic role, with responsibility for overseeing the academic activities of the module, leading one of the online discussion spaces, and for its assessment and marking. The module leader was defined as the first contact point for tutors and they did not necessarily have a tutor role themselves. The assistants were research students who mainly provided the technical support; some of them would act as senior tutors, providing administrative support to the team of tutors. Tutors were mainly off-campus and they were in charge of the moderation of the online learning activities that ran in each module and they also had a rota system to monitor other online spaces. Tutor roles were highly specified and detailed guidelines for carrying out the role were provided in their handbook. Their role included reminding students about the upcoming online events and chasing up students who were not participating. After the first year of the programme an additional role was created: personal tutor. This role was defined as an added responsibility of the tutors rather than a different position. Personal tutors were general advisors for the students rather than providing support that was content-related. They were expected to contact their tutees at least twice during the year to check on their progress.

In relation to the teaching and learning strategies, each module was designed around a set of online learning materials and activities. Learning materials could be of two types: normal units (text-based) and audio units (built around two to three hours of a live campus presentation). These materials were provided online and on a CD, and were designed to be

studied sequentially. After a set number of units, an online seminar led by the tutors would take place in the virtual learning environment, each of them lasting for around two weeks. Each module had three seminars distributed throughout the year. These online seminars were semi-structured discussion activities where students, organised in groups of twenty, participated in the discussion of two or three topics running in parallel threads. In addition, each unit had a discussion space to debate issues related to the topics and activities covered on the learning materials. These discussion spaces were monitored by the tutors on a weekly rota basis.

Student opinions were strong regarding the learning materials and the online activities. In relation to the materials, the feedback from students was harsh, describing them as being of poor quality, out-of-date, containing errors, and missing parts (audio files, text equivalents, etc.). The students received these materials on a CD. During the first year the dispatch of the CD was delayed by three months, which generated a large number of complaints from students. The problem with the materials seemed to be rooted to the time the course team had available for their production and testing before they were due to be delivered to students. The team recognised the insufficient and inaccurate testing procedures, due primarily to a lack of time and resources; but they also had to accept the highly demanding student body regarding the format of the materials. Students reported spending a great deal of time moving the content of the materials into text documents which they could print out, and transforming audio files into MP3 files which they could listen to on their audio players. One further problem with the materials was their currency. Considering that the content of the course was in an area of fast development, students were unsatisfied that the materials contained dated or incomplete information. The problem for the course team on this issue was that, because of its features and delivery format, the development of the materials was taking almost two years, leaving a gap difficult to bridge. Students challenged the course team by saying they wanted to be compensated and asking to be provided with an up-to-date version of the modules the following year and even to be allowed to defer their exams. The response from the team was clear: they were not giving any concessions, but they were open to receiving a full list of the changes required, or desirable, in the materials, and that they would include these in future reviews and developments of the materials.

Regarding the online activities, the documentation reported the concerns of the team on the low level of student participation in the online seminars. This situation prompted the

implementation of a series of evaluation activities that included student and tutor feedback. The results of the tutors' comments led to some changes on the structure and length of the online seminars. Making seminars compulsory was discarded; instead they planned to implement a stronger strategy to encourage participation, including additional monitoring tasks for tutors such as sending personalised e-mails to absent students. It was interesting to find however that the discussion around the seminars did not include the revision of the design of the activities as a possible strategy to improve participation. Student feedback about the seminars matched the view of the course team. Students were not participating as they considered there was not much discussion going on and that not many students were contributing. Students recognised however that, considering their lack of time, they preferred to continue studying the materials rather than contributing in the seminars. Nevertheless they wanted to see more tutor presence.

The only exception to this low level of participation was observed in the revision seminars, aimed at helping students prepare for their exams. According to the course team, this phenomenon was an example of an extra element of motivation being needed in order to improve participation.

Apart from the specific problems with the learning materials and the online seminars, there was an overall dissatisfaction with the virtual learning environment through which the course was delivered. The system used by the course, although functioning, presented many glitches and under-developed sections that the students very quickly perceived as obstructing their study and full participation. This approach was largely based on the fact that students generally had a strong technical background and good experience. Student comments about the virtual learning environment were very strongly worded: poor design, poor interface, difficult and slow navigation that led to confusion, inconsistent labels, fragmented dialogues and random jumps in the order of threads. The team's response to these problems was that they were fully on the side of the students, stressing the fact they were unable to influence the development plans of the VLE (provided by an external unit) and suggesting at some point they were internally evaluating the possibility of moving onto another system. Staff also encouraged students to contribute to the improvement of the virtual learning environment by compiling a list of problems they had encountered to give to the developers.

Student comments and the team responses regarding the virtual learning environment and the learning materials were present in almost all documents and may be considered one of

the major problems encountered by the course team regarding the delivery of the course since it started. Interestingly, the position adopted by the course team was not one of calming down students and focusing on what the system was actually offering them. It seemed that the sympathetic attitude that the course team adopted may have made the problem more acute. It was possible to observe this in the evaluation of the online seminars, in which students were asked to state their level of agreement with a list of statements, some of which read:

> The VLE interface makes it too difficult or time-consuming to participate fully in seminars and discussions.
>
> I would be unlikely to take part in seminars and discussions online, even if it was easier, faster and used a revised interface.
>
> (Module evaluation form, Case Study 3)

Regardless of the answers gathered, it seems that the course team was actually assuming that the system was the cause of the low levels of participation, without taking time to consider any alternative explanations.

From the point of view of the students however, the evaluation results showed a different picture of the reasons why they were not participating; their responses were mostly indicating that their lack of participation was due to other commitments and because they had been unable to keep up with their study of the course materials.

In relation to the support provided to students, the course presented a well-organised structure of academic, technical and administrative support that was well-specified, including the turnaround times. Students however were not satisfied with the support provided. Their main complaint was based on the fact that most of them were studying on the course during the weekends, when no support was available, and this meant that sometimes they had to wait a week for a problem to be solved or a question to be responded to. Academic support was generally well-evaluated although students were swift to complain when a tutor was not – in their opinion – involved enough or had not led the seminar properly. For staff, this was a difficult issue to deal with, as tutors were in fact free to decide how they wanted to lead their seminars. All tutors however had to attend a course on online tutoring before becoming a tutor on the course.

In relation to the quality assurance procedures, there were three issues worth mentioning. The first one was related to the strategies in place for gathering student and tutor feedback.

Among the documentation collected, there were various reports containing detailed comments from tutors and students, most of them collected through informal channels or ad hoc questionnaires. Although the course description documents stated that a formal module evaluation form was in place, it was never used with the students.

A second issue that stands out from the documentation was the paramount importance of the full equivalence between the face-to-face and online versions of the course. At the start of the course this equivalence was the measure by which the modules were evaluated, so the quality of the online course was determined by how much it echoed the on-campus version. By the start of the third year however, the team started to change their view of this. They recognised that the online version of the course was starting to diverge from the face-to-face version, and this was considered to be a good sign. The team was happy to maintain the differences that they regarded as appropriate while also maintaining the similarities that were seen as beneficial.

The third issue to highlight is the extensive review the course went through for its validation and approval, which included reports from internal and external experts who reported thoroughly on the different aspects of the course.

Comparative account for Case Study 3

Comparing the data collected in the interviews with the quality assurance documents this case study presents a number of differences in several aspects.

Regarding the administrative and organisational aspects of the course, the interviews provided a clearer picture on how the course was organised and run. One interesting issue that appeared in staff interviews was their perception that the main problem they were facing was the lack of internal support, yet this was not mentioned in any of the documents.

In terms of the equivalence between the face-to-face and online versions of the course, the interviews highlighted some additional issues to the ones covered in the documentation. The main issue in this area was that although the online course was thought to be a mirror of the on-campus one, the curriculum was not the same. Staff realised that they were in some way misleading students as on several occasions they had directed online students to check the on-campus course website for further information whereas not all the modules

offered as part of the campus-based course are available for online students. This was corroborated by the students interviewed, who considered this mismatch between the two versions an unfair deal for them.

In relation to assessment, the interviews provided a greater understanding of the issues surrounding the discussion on examination and coursework. In the interviews, it was revealed that exams were accepted by staff and students as an appropriate assessment strategy for the course. The discussion about assessment was subsequently focused only on whether it would be possible to add an additional assessment element to the course: for example, whether to integrate an assignment or a report based on students' online participation. However, staff and students differed in the way they evaluated this option. For staff, the administrative and management time, and the plagiarism risks that the inclusion of this type of assessment would involve, led them to uphold assessment based solely on exams. Students, on the other hand, wanted assignments to be included as a way to balance the weight carried by exams, but they also recognised that this would mean diminishing the flexibility of the course and adding more deadlines that may not work well with their employment commitments.

Within the teaching and learning aspects the interviews revealed several differences to what was gathered from the documents. One initial aspect was related to the quality of the materials. The documentation presented a view of poor quality materials, and in particular that they were out of date. Interestingly the interviews, and a further survey of students confirmed that students' perception was not as strongly negative about the materials, with only 20% of the students considering them seriously dated. Staff views of materials remained similar to the views gathered in the documentation, focusing mostly on the difficulties of maintaining and updating the materials.

The second aspect was related to the level of student participation. The documentation showed that staff perceptions – based on tutors' and students' feedback – was that the major reason for the low levels of participation of students in the online environment was their lack of available time. This view was fully corroborated by the students in the interviews. Regarding the connection between the level of participation and the malfunctioning of the VLE suggested by staff, this was mostly dismissed by students. In the interviews it became clear that the anti-VLE atmosphere was an issue during the first run of the course, and that it was in that context when a group of students created a parallel communication system that had continued to be active among the students.

However, this space was not perceived by students as being in competition with what the course was offering; rather it was a complementary component for their personal communications.

In relation to the support that students received during the course, the interview data confirmed the account laid out in the documents. There were however three new issues. First of all, although students had no complaints about the level of support, staff regarded the administrative support for students as insufficient. The second issue – mentioned in the interviews with students – was the overlapping of the support roles, providing the same type of support to students, especially in the cases of module tutors and tutors. The third issue, also brought up by the students, was their perception that although they considered the support sufficient and of good quality, it was not as good as if it were face-to-face. This view was confirmed by two thirds of the students surveyed.

An unsatisfactory virtual learning environment was the issue mentioned in most of the documents as the biggest problem staff and students had to face in the course. This perception was confirmed by staff, although they limited it to the first year of the course. According to their accounts, the problems calmed down later as most of the technical issues were ironed out. Nevertheless, the VLE was still perceived by staff as a tool with limitations. In contrast, the students surveyed did not support this view, as 80% of them agreed the VLE was fine although it may be slow. This is quite interesting as the documentation was particularly strong and detailed in recording the flaws of the system. However, this mismatch between staff and student views may be based on the fact that the documentation reporting on the problems with the VLE was written by staff and did not include student views.

Summary

From the above account it is possible to suggest that in this online course several relevant aspects of the course delivery were not captured by the documentation. The documentation was varied and covered several topics in much detail, such as the problems with the virtual learning environment. It seemed however as if the documents had been overtaken by some issues, leaving several others topics out of them which were of significant relevance to the quality of the course (for example, the lack of internal support and the inconsistencies between the two versions of the course).

Furthermore, the documentation gives an inaccurate account. This is exemplified by the issues regarding the VLE and the quality of the materials, of which the documents revealed a very negative view, based on student complaints. These complaints existed but they were not as acute or permanent as the documents lent the reader to believe.

This seems to be suggesting that it was the staff agenda which was dominating the topics and the emphases included in the documentation, and which may not have fully captured the current state of issues as students perceived them. It may also be that the rather unstructured way of recording student opinions affected this reporting.

Results Case Study 4

This case study was a postgraduate master's degree course offered by a higher education institution located in London. The programme started being offered in 2001, and it was delivered using a combination of paper based materials with online activities using a virtual learning environment developed by an associated institution.

Documentation in context

The documentation gathered for this case study revealed some distinctive features. The course taken as case study was part of wider range of courses offered by the institution's specialised unit in charge of the provision of distance and online learning courses. In this unit, the courses were usually not distinguished between one another, as they had a modular system, and hence all courses were usually described as one. This made the documentation rather general for the purpose of this research, and although it was possible to identify the main features of the particular course selected as the case study, there were various aspects of the course for which it was not possible to get information with sufficient detail.

Considering the above, the inclusion of this case study in this enquiry was pondered in relation to the minimum material required to become a useful source of data. Although the documentation covered only part of the quality assurance issues analysed and some of them without sufficient detail, it was decided to keep it as a part of the research case studies because of its distinguishing features. There were essentially two reasons for including this course in the study. Firstly, there are several higher education institutions that are managing their distance and online courses through a separate unit that has its own regulations and ways of working. And secondly, from the review of the documentation carried out, it was noticeable that there were some distinctive emphases of the quality assurance aspects under consideration when courses are taken in a group rather than individually. Thus, the inclusion of this case is expected to provide this enquiry with a closer look on how quality assurance issues are managed in those contexts.

The paperwork gathered covered the range of documentation expected, although there were gaps of some importance in relation to the quality assurance procedures in place.

Firstly, the absence of student and tutor feedback information regarding the course under study was highlighted. The only document that could be considered as a module evaluation report was a document that reported on the planning of an evaluation strategy of which there were no results available; additionally the document called 'tutor handbook' was in fact a guide for module writers, and this also was related to all of the courses. Secondly, team meeting minutes were also missing from the documentation collected, although there was no indication in any of the other documents that those meetings were actually taking place. It is important to note that amongst all of the documents gathered, only two were referred specifically to the course under study: a report for the external organisation that funded part of the course development, and the course specification document. All the other documents reported on all of the courses that were part of the unit's offer, including the one under study.

In relation to the quality assurance procedures in place at the institution, the documentation gathered covered similar procedures, although the unit followed different guidelines to the ones set up for the whole institution. According to the information provided on the institutional website, courses should have five formal procedures in place: approval and review, student feedback, student representatives, external examiners and internal programme review process. Detailed guidelines were provided for each of them. Courses were also required to provide student handbooks.

Taking into account the above, although the documentation gathered did not completely represent the quality assurance procedures in place, it was expected that they would provide enough data to explore the ways in which the quality of this course was assured and enhanced in this specific institutional context.

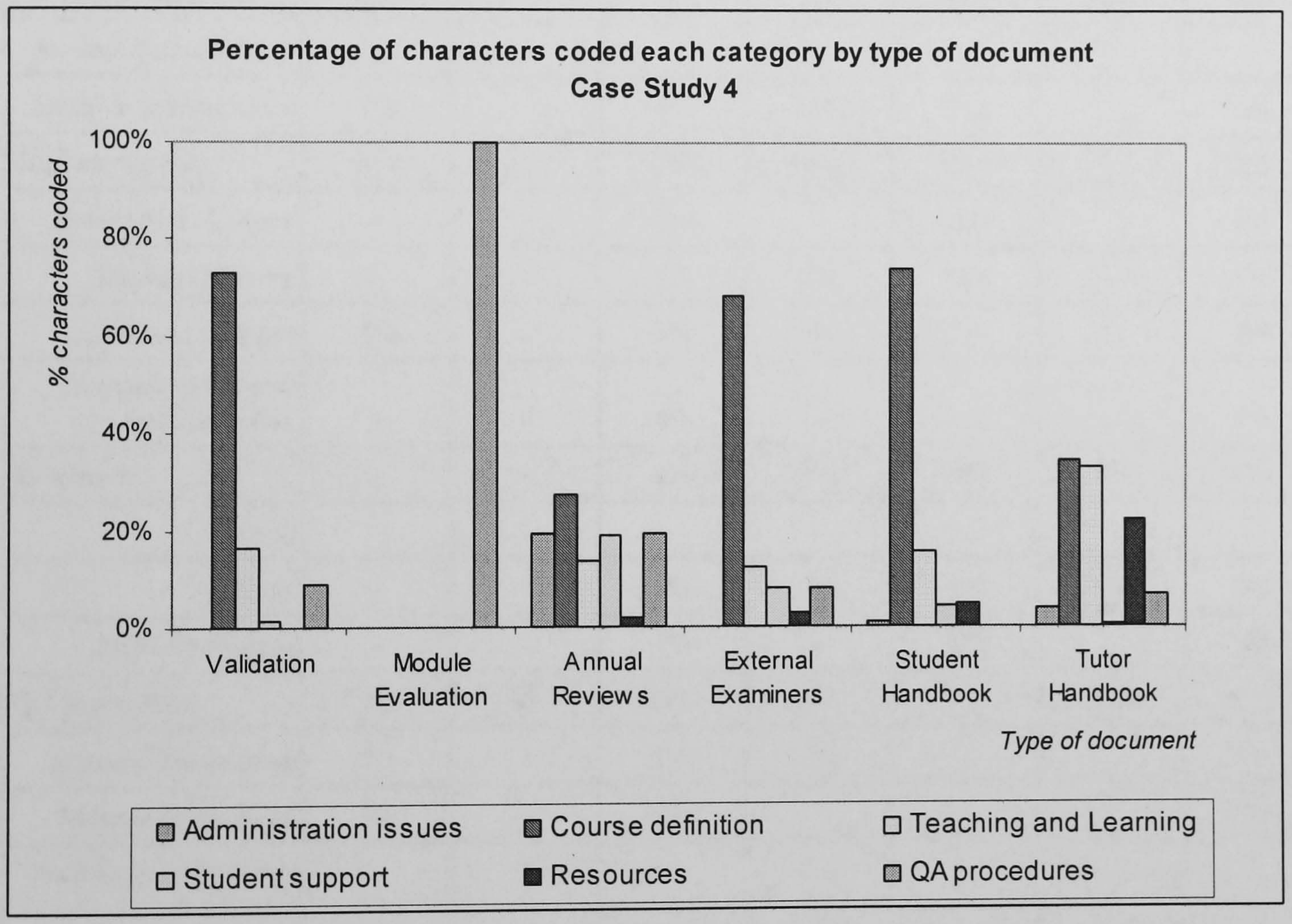
Patterns observed in the documentation

Analysing the content of the documentation gathered it was noticeable that there was a high level of concentration of some of the documents which covered only a few aspects. The most visible of this concentrated pattern was the content of the documents relating to module evaluations (see Figure 6.5). As mentioned above, this documentation was only related to the plan of a formal and very specific evaluation of the modules of some of the programmes offered by the specialised unit of the institution. Similarly, in almost all other documents it was possible to note the high proportion of text pertaining to 'Course

definition', particularly in the student handbook, validation documents and external examiners' reports.

By contrast, the low level of presence of 'Teaching and learning' and 'Student support' issues was clearly visible. This can best be noted in Table 6.6 which shows those categories recording just 25% of the text coded in all documents. The tutor handbook displayed the largest number of characters coded under 'Teaching and learning', all of them concentrated on issues related to 'Teaching methods'. Annual review reports showed the more widespread distribution of their content across the different categories, although it was noticeable that there were few mentions of 'Resource' issues in them.

Figure 6.5 Percentage of characters coded under each general category, by type of document – Case Study 4



The distribution of quality assurance issues across the documents was interesting and also explained the rather skewed overview the documentation presented (see Table 6.6). The total absence of many of the key quality assurance categories in many of the documents analysed could be explained by the fairly general focus of the documents themselves, where courses were not considered individually but as a group. This was clearly the case for the student handbook which was common for all the online courses offered by the unit.

Table 6.6 Percentage of characters coded under each category by type of document (in relation to documents' totals) – Case Study 4

	Validation	Module Evaluation	Annual Reviews	External Examiners	Student Handbook	Tutor Handbook	Totals
Administration issues	-	-	19%	-	1%	4%	7%
Course definition	73%	-	27%	69%	74%	34%	52%
ILOs	1%	-	4%	-	-	-	1%
Expectations	4%	-	-	-	53%	22%	18%
Curriculum	64%	-	11%	1%	-	-	14%
Assessment	5%	-	13%	67%	21%	13%	19%
Teaching and Learning	16%	-	13%	12%	15%	33%	17%
Student Capacity	-	-	-	1%	-	-	-
Staff Capacity	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Teaching Methods	16%	-	4%	1%	14%	33%	12%
Student Expectations	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Student Achievement	1%	-	9%	11%	1%	-	5%
Student support	1%	-	19%	8%	4%	-	8%
Before Start Course	-	-	11%	-	1%	-	4%
During Delivery	-	-	1%	1%	1%	-	1%
Academic support	1%	-	3%	7%	2%	-	2%
Accessibility-Equal Opportunities	-	-	4%	-	-	-	1%
Resources	-	-	2%	3%	5%	22%	6%
Staff	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Facilities	-	-	1%	3%	2%	22%	5%
Delivery System	-	-	1%	-	2%	-	1%
QA procedures	9%	100%	19%	8%	-	6%	10%
External Examiners	3%	-	6%	7%	-	-	3%
Module Evaluation	1%	-	5%	-	-	-	2%
Stud Rep, complaints & appeals	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Annual Review	1%	-	2%	-	-	-	1%
Other QA procedures	5%	100%	7%	1%	-	6%	4%
totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Map of quality assurance issues present in the documents

Considering the specific institutional context in which this case study was located and the absence of detailed accounts of the issues that this course may present, the difficulties

encountered in identifying and tracing particular issues across the documents were not surprising. The lack of student feedback information meant that the identification of issues relied completely on team reports. Among these reports, there was only one issue stated as being raised by students: that the assessment was solely based on examination while assignments were only optional. In the report, it was mentioned that the team had taken up this issue and had started to consider the possibility of giving assignments some weight in the overall marking of the modules. Reviewing later reports, the issue was not mentioned again in any of them, and the student handbook for the current year stated that assessment was fully based on examination. This situation contrasted with the active consideration given by the team to the issues raised by the external examiners, which were fully discussed and acted upon (for example their concern regarding the type of questions in the exams).

Contrasting the documents' content with what was expected to be found according to the theoretical map of quality issues that the procedures should be covering (Appendix Three), the quality assurance documents analysed for this course presented a rather incomplete account.

- Intended learning outcomes were explicit and clearly stated in the documents, including their relationship with external organisations' goals that led to the development of the programme, as well as the overall aims of the unit. Nonetheless there were no references in relation to external reference points such as the QAA infrastructure.

- Regarding the curriculum, it was interesting to note that the curriculum was only described in detail in one of the course review documents, written when the course was just starting. The course specification also presented a brief account of the curriculum, but with no specific information about its modules. This document however was not intended for student reading.

- Expectations on students were well explained, detailing roles and responsibilities in the context of an online course. Expectations about staff however were not mentioned in any of the documents.

- The documents presented only a general statement about the institution's awareness of the accessibility legislation and its implications, which was highlighted in the annual review reports as an aspect that should be considered for future developments. Regardless of this declaration, issues like accessible electronic information and materials, alternative teaching strategies or IT support for access were not mentioned in any of the

documents.

- In relation to the assessment procedures and criteria, information for students was quite complete with the exception of the strategy for the release of assessment results, which was not mentioned in any of the documents. It was probably due to the fact that all modules were assessed by written examination, that the information provided to students regarding the assessment adequacy for the learning outcomes and issues like plagiarism and cheating were not covered by the documents.

- Background information about staff was minimal. Only a few general comments were made regarding their experience.

- In relation to the quality assurance procedures, the documents included references to student feedback strategies and review of materials processes, although it was not possible to obtain any documentation regarding their application or results.

A description of this course was built using the information provided by the documents. This account is presented in the following section.

Documents' account of the course – Case Study 4

This master's level course was delivered by a combination of paper based resources and online activities. The course was integrated with the internal, face-to-face provision offered by the institution, particularly in terms of the learning materials produced. Precisely what this integration meant in terms of curriculum flexibility or parity of standards was unclear in the documentation.

Although the course was officially offered for the first time in 2001, some of its modules were being offered as optional modules for other awards since 1998. The structure of the master's course included four core modules, four optional modules (from a choice of eight) and two research modules (research methods and a dissertation). The minimum registration time was two years with a maximum of five years. Students could opt for two intermediate awards: a postgraduate diploma which did not include the research component of the curriculum; and a postgraduate certificate, which could be obtained completing only four modules (three core modules plus one optional). Each module lasted thirty weeks, with an additional five weeks for exam revision. Each module comprised ten units. In terms of study time, each unit was designed around fifteen hours of study, and one full module

required five hours per week. Considering that a student might attempt to complete the course in two years, this would have meant doing five modules each year, demanding twenty-five hours of study per week. The student handbook however recommended students did not take more than three or four modules in the first year.

Modules were mainly text based which were delivered – either in print or electronic format – as a study pack containing a study guide and a collection of readings. Some modules also had videos, audio tapes or computer programmes. It was not clear whether the course under study included any of these materials. The virtual learning environment was offered as a communication channel to enhance interaction among peers and with tutors. Although the participation in this environment was optional, the team regarded it as an integral part of the teaching and learning strategy of the course that had increased the interaction among students and with tutors. It was also used as a mechanism for submitting the assignments. Regrettably, the documentation did not provide any data regarding the actual level of use of this environment.

All modules were assessed by a one hour written examination with the exception of the dissertation. The documentation showed an interesting debate between the course team and the external examiners regarding the type of questions that were more appropriate in the exam papers. External examiner's feedback was inconsistent regarding the issue, making the consideration of it a difficult challenge for staff to solve.

Modules also had assignments which were marked by tutors, but were not compulsory and did not count towards the final mark. Although the annual review revealed that the possibility of incorporating some of the assignments into the formal assessment had being considered, it had not yet being implemented. The course strongly encouraged students to do the assignments as a way of receiving formal feedback and advice that would allow them to identify their level of learning up to that moment in the module, as well as helping them in their preparation for the exam. Unfortunately, there was no data regarding the number of students that were submitting assignments.

According to the information gathered, students received the study pack for each module and they then worked individually on the readings, activities, exercises and tasks through which they were guided. Some activities included suggestions for students on how to share their work with peers and encouraged them to post questions to tutors in the online environment. Academic support to students was mainly provided through the formal feedback to the assignments and through the online environment where students could

post their questions. A concern relating to academic support was raised by external examiners, particularly regarding the supervision of dissertations, where a strong relationship between the supervisor and the student was needed from the start of the research to make sure the projects were achievable. The team recognised this as part of the annual review. A related issue regarding dissertation preparation was the lack of local facilities and support that students may face while carrying out their research work. The team were aware of this issue. Athens accounts to access the online library were available for students but the instructions on how to get them were in the online environment, the use of which was optional.

Statistics about registration levels were presented in detail by module, and the course under study was amongst those with the highest registration numbers. Students were mostly international (from 30 different countries), although including an increasing number of UK-based students.

The documentation presented a good overview with regard to quality assurance procedures. In relation to documents pertaining to module evaluations, the documents clearly described a formal student feedback questionnaire included in all the module packs. In addition, students were requested to submit feedback after the completion of an assignment. The problems laid in the response rates. Just 20% of students across all courses had sent back the questionnaire, and the response rate was reported to be less than 15% in the course under study. Unfortunately, no reports on the results of this questionnaire were obtained. The annual review reports compensated for the lack of results by pointing out the increasing amount of feedback being gathered through the virtual learning environment, although there were no details available about the content. An attempt to solve this problem had been made by exploring an online questionnaire which was about to be released. However this solution did not take into account that students were not required to have access to the Internet to undertake the course.

External examiners had been appointed and their reports were fully considered by the course team. The only issue noted regarding their reports was the extremely long time it took for course directors to get hold of the reports after they had gone through all the institutional mechanisms and committees and in turn delaying their response back to the external examiner. It is worth noticing the very detailed process carried out when the course was at the approval stage. The report from the external adviser regarding the course and each of the modules was of outstanding detail, including comments and suggestions

not only regarding the content but also the style and presentation of the materials. The documents also stated that there was an annual review for minor changes of materials, while major changes were carried out every four years; there was no explanation however, on what constituted minor or major changes, and no examples or descriptions of the processes were provided.

The documents revealed plans for a quality review of all programmes and learning materials, which the team envisaged would expose the problems on staff numbers, but there were no reports of the results of that review process. Staff numbers were mentioned however at various points across the documentation as an issue that needed to be addressed, as tutors and markers were mainly experts drawn from the corresponding faculty of the university but without a formal link to the course development.

Finally, it is important to highlight the lack of information regarding student representation, complaints and appeals.

Comparative account for Case Study 4

The unit that was responsible for delivering this course was a specialised department which offered a wide range of programmes. Although the documents showed indications that courses were reviewed in an integrated way, the interviews revealed that this lack of differentiation between courses was very acute. Attempts during the interviews to identify the specific features of the course under study usually failed and most of the responses were given in terms of all of the programmes. Furthermore the students who responded to the supplementary survey were from different programmes. The only course specific-information that it was possible to gather came from two interviewees (a tutor and a student). Considering the difficulty of collecting specific data for the course selected for this study, it is important to note here that this course was considered to be very similar to most of the other courses offered by the unit, and hence the responses obtained during the interviews could also be taken as applying to the specific programme under study in this inquiry. However, it seems more appropriate to approach the analysis of this case study as different from the other cases. Whenever possible, references to the specific programme of study will be made, but on the whole, a more general perspective was adopted.

Comparing the documents' account with the content of the interviews, there were several new issues which came out in the interviews.

The interviews provided a further insight into the way the course was organised, especially regarding the use of the virtual learning environment. The programme was essentially a distance learning course where content was delivered through printed materials and support was provided online through the virtual learning environment. Although the documentation presented a rather optimistic view of the role of the online environment, a more realistic view materialised from the interviews: students were not required to have Internet access, and although they estimated that 90% of the student body were e-mail users, only two thirds of the students had actually accessed the online environment. The consequence of this was that a third of students did not have access to support. Staff indicated that other means of communication were still available (post, phone) but they recognised that one third of the student body were left out of the major source of academic support. Students also agreed on the view that not having Internet access was a disadvantage in terms of support.

Another aspect of the course affected in the same way was the access that students had to further resources, readings and the library. According to the course documentation, all the materials needed to complete the course were delivered to students so they would not need access to the VLE in order to complete the course. Staff recognised however that there were two situations where access to the VLE was required: when the modules were out-of-date, and while writing the dissertation. In cases where the modules were acknowledged as dated, new materials were being provided through the VLE; and students needed to access the Internet to be able to complete their final research project. It seemed however that because the dissertation was at the end of the programme, staff did not regard it as reason enough to define access to the Internet as a requirement for the course.

In relation to the assessment, the interviews showed that staff had a clearer position regarding the inclusion of assignments in the final mark than what was suggested by the documentation. It was written in the documents that the possibility of assignments being included as part of the assessment was under consideration. The interviews revealed that although the issue was still debated regularly, it was clear staff would not include any additional assessment component until some important issues were resolved: the management of the massive volume of assignments coming in, which would have to be double-marked; the funds required to cover the management and marking; and the necessary strategies needed to prevent plagiarism.

An additional issue highlighted in the interviews, and not fully reported in the

documentation, was the amount of academic support from the institution. There were several mentions in the documentation that staff coverage for courses had been reduced in the last few years, and as a consequence, academics and tutors had to be increasingly contracted in. According to the interviews, this was a critical issue as tutors had annual contracts without retainers, and a further issue was that they were providing varying levels of support to students. Although the majority of students regarded tutors' support as of good quality they also indicated that it was very variable. During the period of the interviews, tutors where informed of a plan to pay them based on the number of questions they responded to. This may suggest that there was an important variation in the support provided to students that the new payment system was attempting to recognise and resolve.

Summary

The different institutional situation which this case study presents clearly had an impact on the very large variations found between the two set of data analysed. It seemed that the grouped approach taken by the team to review and evaluate the courses was not capable of capturing the issues that were being observed by tutors and students.

More importantly, it appears that general issues regarding the features of the programmes (such as the requirement for Internet access) were not being recorded as affecting the running of the courses or the support provided to the students.

It could be suggested from this analysis that the documentation was mostly recording general data based on staff's assumptions or expected goals (such as the proportion of students accessing the VLE). It is also interesting to note the strong emphasis given across the documentation to the issues raised by the external examiners, suggesting that the focus of the review was not for internal consumption but to external audiences.

Conclusions

Reviewing the above accounts, two main aspects can be pointed out. Firstly, comparing the four case studies in terms of the number and nature of the issues which were not covered by the quality assurance procedures, it is evident where the differences among them are. Case studies 1 and 2 show the smaller number of differences in-between documents and interview accounts, and most of these gaps were mainly related to more detailed

descriptions and explanations of issues already presented in the documents. Case studies 3 and 4 on the other hand, show a much more contrasted picture in-between the two sets of data.

Secondly, it is possible to observe that most of the issues that tended to be left out from the quality assurance documentation are related to student participation and the support provided for the students. Additionally, issues related to assessment strategies and organisational issues (such as the relationship with the institution, equivalence with the on-campus version of a course, staff coverage, and access to resources) were also missing in the documentation reviewed.

Analysing these issues from the point of view of its sources, it seems clear that the information missing in the quality assurance documentation is mostly that coming from the students, indicating that although courses might have procedures in place to collect student feedback, these strategies may not be sufficient nor fully effective. This mismatch between students and staff perceptions was more acute in case study 3, which was a course that did not have any formal mechanism for collecting student's feedback on a regular basis. By contrast, in case study 1 which presented the most formal procedures regarding students, the issues missed by the documents were far fewer than in the other three cases. In the case of case study 4, which had a more aggregated approach to quality assurance, the issues identified as not being covered by the documentation, were more at a managerial and organisational level, with little focus on the details of the teaching and learning strategies.

In the next chapter – based on the four case studies presented above – two forms of further analysis will be carried out. To begin with there will be a comparison between the case studies regarding the implementation of each of the quality assurance procedures, to reveal the institutional and contextual factors, as well as to identify the features of online learning found to be affecting them. Secondly, there will be a comparison of the case studies around issues affecting the effective implementation of the quality assurance procedures, illustrating the ways in which these issues were revealed in each of the cases.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EXPLORING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES

To respond to the research questions posed for this enquiry, the discussion of the results are presented over three discrete sections.

Firstly, the analysis focuses on the quality assurance procedures implemented, and their effectiveness, across the case studies. This examination aims to explore the way these procedures were being affected by the features of the online mode of delivery.

Secondly, the features of online learning found to be affecting the application of the quality assurance procedures are further discussed in relation to the implications that these features have for online courses in dual-mode institutional contexts. This analysis aims to explore how higher education institutions approached an effective implementation of these quality assurance mechanisms within their online and mixed-mode courses.

Thirdly, the quality assurance procedures are discussed in terms of Barnett's (1994b) framework as a way to visualise the tensions between quality assurance and quality enhancement in the operation of these mechanisms, and in this way identify the specific adjustments required to move towards an enhancement-led implementation.

Overview of quality assurance procedures implemented in each case study

The quality assurance documentation analysed in this study, due to its nature, was mainly reporting on the issues raised by the application of the procedures rather than on the quality assurance mechanisms themselves. Based on this, most of the questions prepared and the answers gathered in the interviews were used to build up a clearer and more detailed picture of the quality assurance procedures.

As an overview of what quality assurance procedures each of the case studies had in place, Table 7.1 shows and briefly describes the procedures operating at the time of the interviews.

Across the four case studies, all of the expected quality assurance procedures were present: external examiners, module evaluations, annual reviews, student representation, team meetings and peer review of materials. Each case study presented a different combination of them with a diverse level of formality in their implementation.

Table 7.1 Overview quality assurance procedures in place by case studies

	Case Study 1	Case Study 2	Case Study 3	Case Study 4
External Examiners	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Module evaluations	Yes Open questions by email after each assignment	Yes Online questionnaire after each module	No	Yes Online questionnaire after each module
Student representative	No	Yes	No	No
Annual reviews	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Team meetings	Monthly team meetings Quality meetings each term Annual review meeting	Bi-annual team meeting Bi-annual review meeting	Bi-annual team meeting Annual review meeting	Monthly management meetings Annual tutor workshop Annual review meeting
Peer review of materials	Yes Internal peer review meetings	Yes Internal peer review and piloting in first run	Not formally	Yes External only in new modules, during first run
Tutor feedback	Formal online space, informal face-to-face and email contacts and through meetings	Informal email contact and informal face-to-face	Informal email contact, online events, annual tutor face-to-face meeting	Informal email contacts, Annual tutor face-to-face meeting
Approximate size of team	6	4	12	11 staff in the central team of the Unit + variable number of academics and tutors
Comments	Own quality framework	Follow institutional procedures adapted	Partially follow institutional procedures	Partially follow institutional procedures

Case study 1 portrayed a well-formalised system of procedures which was well-known to all the participants in the course. This case was the only one that had its own quality framework, especially created for the online course, which organised and gave structure to the application of the procedures. This framework seemed to work as the point of reference for all the participants, and was complemented by the designation of one of the team members as the 'quality person' whose responsibility it was to make sure that the implementation of the framework and its procedures were carried out accordingly. The only procedure that this course did not have in place was student representation. This quality assurance mechanism was also absent in the other two fully-online courses. The extent to which the framework was aligned with their institutional quality assurance policy was not regarded as an issue by the course team considering that they were the first course to go online in their institution and as a consequence, they had devised their own framework and a set of 'translation methods' with which they responded to the institution's reporting requests. As a course, they seemed quite well integrated within the institutional structure.

Case study 2 presented a rather different scenario as it was the only mixed-mode course in this study, combining online with face-to-face activities. This case officially had all the procedures mentioned above in place, although it had different levels of formality when compared to the other cases. The team meetings are an example of this as they were used frequently as a strategy for keeping up with the daily management of courses. In this case study, team meetings were not formally held by the team members, except twice a year, where an overall review of the course was carried out. A possible explanation for the more informal set-up of this particular mechanism was the small size of the course team (four people) and the strong leadership shown by the two course leaders. Their relationship with the institution-wide procedures was also a distinctive feature of this case study. Although they mostly followed the policies in place – in some cases adapted to their particular circumstances – the course team had a fairly detached approach to the institution-wide procedures and processes.

Case study 3 also had particular features regarding its quality assurance set up. The procedures in place in this case study were few, and some of them were rather informally organised. Interestingly this was the only case in which module evaluations were not applied with students, although in the past they had run some occasional feedback events, but these were not formalised in any way. What seemed to be affecting the lack of

formalisation was the way the course team had organised the course management, the size of the course team and also the institution-wide policies regarding quality assurance. This team organised their internal communication around casual encounters and occasional meetings that may have worked for a small team of two or three people. However this course was, compared to the other case studies, rather large in terms of the number of team members and students (twelve staff members and around 50 students in each cohort). The course team was also spread-out and working independently from each other, with a rather basic coordination role on the part of the course leader, which affected the implementation of the quality assurance procedures. The problem here seemed to be related to the lack of strong coordination – necessary to keep the course running as a unitary programme – which made the gaps more evident: the main reason for not applying the module evaluations was that the course leader thought the team who designed it would be sending it out, and vice versa. Additionally, their alignment with the institution-wide procedures was only partial, firstly because the institutional policy was not fully established, and secondly, because the course team had not taken up the issue.

Case study 4, as was explained earlier, presented some specific features regarding its institutional context compared to the other three case studies. In this particular case study, the quality assurance procedures were set up as organisational strategies across programmes in which individual courses were not identified. The structure of this course should be considered mainly as a collection of modules, where different combinations led to specific awards. The quality assurance procedures in place were large operational efforts applied to the full range of courses on offer, and their results were mainly focused on general issues that applied across the board. Other specific features of this case study were the structure of the team and the relationship with the institution-wide structure and policies. The team in this case followed the structure of traditional distance learning units where academic leadership/authoring and tutoring of courses are separated. In this specific case study this separation was strengthened by the overall position that the unit had within the university and its origins: the unit was brought into the institution and the established academic staff became course leaders for the distance learning courses, while tutors continued to be mainly drawn in by the unit as a separate academic support strategy. The problem facing the unit under this system of working was the lack of academic support from the institution-wide structure. This situation had created several specific problems in the implementation of the quality assurance procedures. Keeping courses up-to-date is one example. Courses were supposed to be following a cycle of revisions that would allow the

team to identify the modules that needed updating, but the large number of courses and the need for academic leaders/authors on those courses meant that many courses, although identified as being seriously dated, were still in need of updating.

From the above review it seems that each of the case studies presented some particular features that were affecting the implementation of the quality assurance procedures in place, particularly those associated with the organisational context in which the course was located. In this sense, it is possible to make a link between this context and the design of this research project. The focus of this research was explicitly defined to explore the quality assurance procedures of courses offered by traditional campus-based higher education institutions which had started to offer online programmes. The reason for deciding on this particular setting was based mainly on the perceived difficulties that these courses encountered in order to be integrated within the mainstream processes within their institutions. The above accounts of the particular contexts on which the case studies were located demonstrate this complex situation. In some way it appeared that online and mixed-mode courses tended to become isolated from the rest of the institutional processes in place, unless there is a clear and strong leadership to bring them in, as is illustrated by Case Study 1. A contrasting example is Case Study 2, whose team presented a rather ambivalent relationship with the institution-wide processes. They were trying on one hand to get the support they need to successfully carry out their programme, and on the other hand, they are attempting to set their team and programme apart as much as possible from what they were considering as unsatisfactory support by implementing the processes independently. Case studies three and four also show a quite isolated position within their own institutions, the first one as a course, and the second with the unit as a whole. This isolation is evident in the way the institution-wide quality assurance mechanisms allowed these courses to go about their business on their own, sometimes without any major interference, as they did not have any particular requirements for online courses. There may be several explanations for this and the data gathered did not include the views of institutional quality managers that would allow for the exploration of answers. However the data showed that course teams tended to put themselves and their courses in a detached position with regard to the institutional structures that may have been encouraging this oversight by the institutions. This issue is discussed in more detail below.

Quality assurance procedures: exploring their effectiveness

By the examination of how each of the quality assurance procedures had been implemented and adapted in the case studies, the exploration of how online courses approach quality assurance effectively would be possible.

In this section the implementation of each quality assurance procedure across the different case studies is analysed and discussed, drawing mainly on the information provided by the interviews.

External examiners

External examiners were one of the few quality assurance procedures in place in all case studies with an equal level of formalisation. It was not possible to obtain external examiner reports from all the cases, but the four courses had one or more external examiners in place who were well regarded by staff.

The role of the external examiners was perceived as a positive one by all staff members, especially by bringing an external viewpoint to the course, and through their support in the assessment process. Staff considered that no particular distinction should be made on the role of the external examiner for an online course. In two courses however, which were in the process of changing the person who was acting as external examiner, some staff suggested that they had looked for someone who, apart from being an expert in the course topic, had the appropriate experience and would show sympathy for the online mode of delivery. The perceived benefits of looking for these characteristics in external examiners were in order to get a more critical review of the course, and due to the likelihood that external examiners would have a better understanding of the way in which distance/online learning operates (although this was always dependant on their personality):

> … it is actually helpful if they [the external examiner] kind of want to know why you do something in case you have an entirely valid reason, rather than just state this isn't happening. (Staff, Case Study 4)

Reviewing the ways in which the distance and online features of the courses affected the implementation of the external examiner's role, it seems that only the opportunity to meet students, and in some cases all the tutors, could be affected; however these issues were not mentioned as affecting the quality of the feedback and support provided by the external examiners.

Annual Reviews

Annual reviews were another of the procedures in place in all the cases under study. The four courses analysed adhered to a similar cycle of review meetings and reporting to be done annually. The value assigned to this procedure by staff was also similar: it was perceived as a useful exercise as it helped with the organisation of the paperwork, with discussion of the issues, and with the writing down the issues which arose from it.

> I think what's helpful.... I mean it's a real pain doing it.... it takes ages but what's helpful is having to produce that documentation for it, so yeah..... so I mean actually sitting down for a day and producing and doing what I've just said about bringing together all the disparate sources of student feedback and checking with the administrator about the student numbers and going back and checking their progression figures that they send us from [the external unit] and to check they've got that right, and I mean all that I think is quite a useful exercise to go through. (Staff, Case Study 1)

However the perceived effectiveness of the annual review process varied. Although most staff considered the process worthwhile as an additional opportunity for reviewing the course, some staff considered annual reviews rather useless as, in their view, although things get noted, their institutions were not prepared to deal with and resolve the problems recorded in the documentation. Analysing this perception in terms of Barnett's framework (1994b) and the degree of ownership that staff felt over annual reviews, it is interesting to note that although they considered this procedure valuable in terms of their operation within the team, they considered the actual enhancement potential of the review activity was not in their sphere of power, and in this way, the mechanism was partly transformed into a bureaucratic exercise. Interestingly, this latter view only came up in those courses whose team members were positioning themselves, and the course separately from the institutional structures.

In the cases where the course was part of a collaborative scheme between the university and an external organisation specialising in distance/online learning, an interesting issue could be observed. In these cases, the courses' own institutions were formally in charge of the quality assurance of the programme; however, the annual review procedure applied in these courses was the one proposed by the external unit. The reasons for this were diverse. In some cases, the institutions were not requesting any annual review report; in other cases, the report requested was of less relevance, or was less specific than the one requested by the external unit:

> It's an issue for [the institution] because they haven't really got their brain round

> that still. We have to comply… [..] .. we comply with the [institution] quality assurance requirements and we do whether it's programme specifications or validation, it goes through [it]. QA wise my view is that [the external unit] is better in terms of grip on quality assurance issues… (Staff, Case Study 4)

Although the source of the request for the annual review could vary, in general, staff were mostly concerned with its effectiveness rather than with its appropriateness for the modality. Staff believed that there was no need for a different annual review form, as the particular features of the courses would be brought up in the issues that are stated in the report.

The effectiveness of the annual reviews however seems to be connected with the fact that the courses were online. As the issues highlighted by this procedure were 'different' from the ones that were 'normally' appearing in other course reviews, staff perceived that senior management were not prepared or not able to understand the relevance of them, hence they were not providing the necessary support to solve the problems. It is not possible to know whether this situation was perceived similarly by staff running face-to-face courses, in which case, the managerial problem would not be specific to online courses. From the point of view of the staff interviewed however, there was a particular problem with the online courses and the management capacity to deal with the issues associated with them.

This data shows how the annual review was a procedure which was inclined to be detached from its enhancement function. Harvey (2002) suggests there are two elements hindering the procedures' capacity for enhancement: when the procedures are perceived as events rather than a process; and when teams carry out a useful self-reflecting process but render two different accounts, one for external consumption and another to be used internally. The interviews with the course teams showed how these two elements were somehow present in the way teams approached annual reviews. As was shown in the results, teams considered annual reviews a painful process, which usually came at the wrong time of the year, were useless in terms of their effects, but were helpful for the team. This feeling was particularly strong in Case Studies 1 and 2, in which the teams approached the annual reviews as an exercise that would help them understand the processes they had been carrying out during the year, putting problems down in writing, and generally acknowledging the benefits which the process of writing the review would bring internally. These teams felt however that it was not an easy task, and they also recognised that, in the end, it would not make any difference:

> … it wouldn't matter how much details [we] recorded in our report that goes to our

> Head of Department; the Head of Department then summarises the main issues of all the programme reports operating in his department, that goes to the Head of School who then summarises all the key issues from all the Head's Department's report,... which then goes on further into the university. So each time you get a sort of summary of a summary of the summary of the summary so actually what goes to the centre is really quite small inconsequential and sort of doesn't make a difference. (Staff, Case Study 2)

In Case Studies 3 and 4 the teams tended to see annual reviews as a more bureaucratic process. Although they explicitly recognised annual reviews as a valuable activity for the team, the documents themselves tended to report more statistical data and to focus on course definition issues compared with the other two case studies.

This perception of annual reviews led teams to approach annual reviews as an administrative burden, which had to be written up just for accountability purposes and which were not being used as a tool for enhancement. This was particularly evident when a staff in Case Study 3 admitted being careful in what they were committing themselves to improve in the following year as part of the annual review report. Although this comment may be considered cynical, it shows one extreme way in which the annual review procedure could be approached by staff. The factors influencing this particular approach to annual reviews cannot however be said to be linked to, or caused by, the online environment.

Module evaluations

In contrast to the previous procedures, the strategies for collecting student feedback were problematic in the courses studied even at the level of formal compliance. Module evaluation seems to be one of the procedures which was greatly affected by the online modality.

Each case study presented a different way of dealing with this quality assurance mechanism, however, common to all of them was a sense of evolution in the way they had approached the implementation of this procedure. Two cases are good illustrations of this maturation process, as they had changed their methods of getting students to give feedback more than once, in an attempt to get better response rates and/or a higher quality of feedback. The first of these cases (Case Study 1) is a particularly good example as they had actually tried many different methods before coming to agree on a simple but well-defined strategy; it involved sending a personalised e-mail to students after each assignment (together with the assignment feedback) where a set of open-ended questions were asked.

This e-mail was sent by the administrator who was in charge of collecting the responses and also for collating them into one file before they were made available to the rest of the team. Although this system had just started being implemented at the moment of the interviews, staff perception was that they were getting better response rates (around 80%) than previously, and more complete answers from students. Three elements were new to this strategy compared with previous efforts made in this course: the questionnaire was centrally administered (in other times each tutor was in charge of sending the questionnaire to the students in each module); it was sent out at a clearly indicated time; and the processes for collecting and reporting the results were clear to students and staff. This strategy seemed appropriate for the course as there were only a small number of students which allowed for the manual analysis of the responses.

The second case (Case Study 4) that had implemented several strategies had come to agree on a different approach this time: an online survey. The difference in the strategy adopted was clearly influenced by the high number of students expected to complete the survey and thus the need to have an automated system for analysis and reporting. In this case too, the new strategy was being implemented just at the moment of the interviews and it represented a big change for the team, as well as generating considerable expectations as the previous attempts did not provide any useful data. Students confirmed the effectiveness of this new approach for getting more responses: the students interviewed and surveyed indicated they were responding to the survey only now that it was available online. It was however surprising to notice that the tutor did not have any information about the module evaluations, neither in paper format nor online. In this case study, the module evaluation was also administered centrally, but the team was not clear how the results were going to be processed.

The other two case studies presented different circumstances regarding module evaluations. In one case (Case Study 2), the course had an online survey in place for several years with an explicit procedure for its monitoring and reporting. However, it was not until the information was requested for the purpose of this research project that the course team realised the very low response rates they were getting. In this case, regardless of how well-established the procedure was, it failed to gather enough responses and of sufficient quality to be considered useful. As the course leader put it:

> ...we do it online but as you are seeing from comments that's an area of weakness. We don't have enough evaluation, we want more. (Staff, Case Study 2)

Students also had some issues with the survey they had to complete. In this case, the survey was online and tutors were alerted and could review the responses every time a student had completed it, without knowing who submitted it. On one occasion this facility prompted a tutor to respond publicly to some negative opinions submitted by a student, creating suspicion among students to the true anonymity of the survey, and in some ways affecting their willingness to complete the survey. In this case, it appeared that the survey had become more than just an after-module evaluation, but a mechanism to monitor student opinions, and what would have been taken as evidence of tutors' interest in knowing student views and opinions, worked against it. As a result, the few students responding it were mostly completing only the closed questions.

The fourth case study (Case Study 3) did not have a module evaluation formally in place. This was not because it had not been planned, but because nobody asked the students to complete it:

> …I think probably [the module evaluation] fell between the cracks for this session, because I thought …[…]… would be sent out by the development team to all the students but it didn't go out at all, not to our students and I don't know who was responsible for sending it out… (Staff, Case Study 3)

Interestingly, the file with the survey was actually available in the virtual learning environment but no-one noticed it. Students were mostly unaware of any evaluation; 33% of all students interviewed remembered having completed it.

What seemed to have happened in this course was that the distributed responsibilities affected the coordination between the teams involved in the course, causing the procedure to get lost between the gaps. Only one member of staff thought the survey was in place and running although she did not know who was collecting the results.

Omitting this last example, module evaluations seem to be a procedure which teams struggled to get right in their courses. Despite the different mechanisms by which courses attempted to collect feedback from students, one common problem was the low response rates they were getting, which staff considered to be directly affected by the distance. Students also recognised the problem of low responses, but their reasons for not completing the evaluations were different. In the students' view, not completing the survey was mainly related to the time of the year when they were requested to do it, which usually fell after examination time. At this time of the year, they really wanted to relax, rather than think about the course:

> ...and all the others that we just sent pieces of paper and you had to then send them back by post which once you finished your exam right, and you have a month of rest you really... but I think people just forget about that, to be really honest however they have moaned during the term. Not that they can't be bothered, but they have just worked so hard so you need a rest before you can start again..... (Student, Case Study 4)

Additionally, teams tended to believe that 'online surveys' were associated with 'tick boxing' answers, which students tended to do quickly and without major reflection, while open questions could gather a higher quality of responses.

> ... what is interesting is that I still think some people have been very instrumental about filling them in, because every question has a open text box and it is rare to get the student that puts anything in and it is even rarer to have a student who puts a lot in, I think I have had one or two students this last term who has really taken time to write something almost in every question. (Staff, Case Study 2)

The problems with this view began when students would not respond because open questions require too much effort.

> ... I think it's a bit long and my feeling is that you want people to complete things they shouldn't be too long... [...] ...because I think you have to think too hard, too much... you know, then you tend not to do things, whereas if it is possible yes, no or very quick answers... you will do it. (Student, Case Study 1)

The challenge is probably to get the right balance. Beyond the strategy selected by teams to collect students' feedback, the question in the teams' minds remains about its effectiveness which is focused on how to get data, rather than on the quality of the data gathered, not to mention acting upon the feedback collected.

The above analysis of the case studies reveals that the online modality is severely affecting the module evaluation implementation and effectiveness. Initial evidence of this was that the three courses that were applying module evaluations had already adapted the questionnaires to make them more appropriate to the online modality. The control that teams had over the features of the module evaluation contrasted with the little use they made of the feedback it produced. In Barnett's (1994b) words, this procedure demonstrated how a procedure could become highly 'technicist' despite being fully under the control of the course team.

Overall the implementation of module evaluations presented problems regarding: response rates; the management of its application and results collection; and the type of questionnaires used.

Response rates were largely a consequence of the fact that students were at a distance, and as a result course teams had barely any control over the process. The strategies to overcome this lack of control over students' responses were made through various attempts to improve other aspects of the questionnaires, such as making questions more meaningful for the students in order to motivate them to respond, or by changing the way the questionnaires were applied to facilitate their responses. The series of changes found in the strategies implemented in the type of questionnaires used, and the different ways to administrate them represented the effort put in by course teams to have more control over students' responses, and ultimately to get a greater number of responses. Regardless of the effect that these changes actually had on the quantity of the final responses, the main challenge for staff was to obtain enough relevant feedback that would make the collected data valuable for quality assurance and enhancement.

According to Biggs (2001) student feedback questionnaires are one of the procedures that pose some risks for enhancement when they only focus on the teacher rather than the teaching strategy, because students tend to penalise alternative methods. The questionnaires applied in the courses under study – probably because they were already adapted by the course teams – were not necessarily focusing on the teacher or the teaching style. It could be suggested nevertheless that the module evaluations applied were not fully effective for enhancement purposes, mainly for two reasons: firstly, the low number of responses led course teams to discard the results as invalid, regardless of their content; and secondly, the absence of clear and effective strategies for collecting and processing the results in some cases meant that the responses were left untouched or only lightly analysed, thus loosing their potential to illuminate the overall evaluation and eventual improvement of the course.

In the three courses that were applying student surveys (Case Studies 1, 2 and 4), it appeared that the administration of the module evaluations for students was relatively well-managed, as course teams were well aware of the consequences that the strategy selected would have on response rates. The main problem for the management of the module evaluations that affected its enhancement function was found to be in the way questionnaire results were collected and analysed. Case Studies 2 and 4 are good examples for demonstrating this rather unbalanced management of the surveys by the teams. In these two courses, the teams were primarily focused on the appropriate application of the questionnaires and in obtaining more results, rather than on planning how the results were

going to be analysed and later used, as well as who would be responsible for this process. There was only one case study (Case Study 1) that had an explicit and clear procedure for this which allowed the team to take the feedback into account in their review activities.

In this sense, it seems that the distant location of the students was not alone in affecting the module evaluations; the distributed organisation of the teams and the resulting ambiguity in the allocation of responsibilities were also affecting an appropriate management of students' feedback. From the analysis of Case Study 1 it was clear that their success in gathering and taking into account the feedback from students was, in addition to having a clear strategy, the fact that there was one person (one tutor) in charge of the whole process, from the design of the questionnaire up to the reporting of results to the team. In contrast, in the other two case studies with module evaluations in place, there was no named person responsible, which resulted in no one taking care of the processes associated with the collection of feedback. It might be argued that this would happen in any mode of teaching and learning. However, as the online courses tended to have a rather isolated position within the institutions, there was no external authority on the courses that would put pressure on the teams to follow the procedure, making the responsibility lie solely within course teams. Case Study 3 represents this situation at its limits. The institution had a centrally-administrated survey and as the course team considered it inappropriate, they designed one form specifically for the course; but as nobody in the team was in charge of it, it was never implemented.

The consequences of the approach for managing the evaluation results could be related to the underlying purpose of the mechanism itself. From the staff's point of view, module evaluations were a very important mechanism to gather students' opinions regarding: the running of the modules; the achievement of goals; for measuring student satisfaction; and in general, as a very useful monitoring tool. Module evaluations were the main, and usually the only mechanism by which courses were gathering feedback from students, and in this sense, the focus on getting more responses is understandable. It is however surprising to observe that results were not treated with the same level of attention by the teams, as if the application of the questionnaire was enough evidence to demonstrate they had achieved those goals. It seems that course teams were in a way 'playing the game' of using student feedback for enhancement (Newton, 2002) by utilising the surveys, but at the same time, by not analysing and using the results, the mechanism was becoming more of an accountability tool, where the most important element was to show to external observers

that the procedure had been applied and results obtained.

Student representatives

Student representation was only in operation in the course which had a combination of online and mixed-mode modules (Case Study 2). However, it was found to be the quality assurance procedure most seriously affected by the online modality of the courses. The other three fully-online courses had not implemented it; in fact, none of them had tried to do it. The reasons for not having student representatives for staff were clear: students were spread around the country and abroad, hence they could not be attending the staff meetings; and/or students did not know each other, hence they would not be able to select their representatives. Students' views were similar, plus they envisaged difficulties involved in collecting other students' opinions and they regarded this as a major obstacle. In this sense, the mode of delivery of the course was directly affecting the implementation of this procedure.

The mixed-mode course (Case Study 2) had similar problems. The course team struggled to get the representative selected and they normally managed to only get one representative even though there were four positions available. In addition, although they had put the team meetings on the same day as other student events on campus, usually the representative failed to attend. This suggests that students knowing one another may not be the only factor affecting the implementation of this procedure. Interestingly, the students had a different view regarding the effectiveness of this procedure. The students interviewed knew about the representative but none of them had used that mechanism to put forward any issue to the staff team. On the contrary, they claimed not to need student representatives at all as they would always contact the tutor directly should there be any problems or issues to comment on.

> I would have just seen my own tutor… […] … to be totally honest it wouldn't cross my mind to go through that channel [the student representative]. (Student, Case Study 2)

This view was shared by the students surveyed for this case study. Additionally, when students from the other courses which did not have student representatives, were asked to evaluate whether having this position would had been useful for them, they found it hard to identify any benefits:

> I don't know whether... not sure what use it would be.... it would only be of use I suppose if there were general issues and there were being picked up or something, you know, it's quite different than if you've got a real group in the sense of, you know, lack of class then you might.... I could see more value in that because it's a virtual... it's, you know, I am not sure whether there'd be a use or not. I can't see a use to it myself at the moment. (Student, Case Study 1)

This situation poses the question as to whether student representation is an appropriate procedure for online and mixed-mode courses. It seems that given the strong and close link that is established between students and their tutors, student representation may not have a role to play in this context, at least not in its current form.

At present this is a mechanism for gathering student feedback which works through the appointment of one or more representatives of the programme, who would be in charge of collating the comments from their colleagues and attend meetings with staff where the feedback would be put forward.

The fact that students in an online course are at a distance clearly works against the basic feature of this procedure which is established on the physical participation of students on the different institutional committees where staff and other stakeholders of courses are present. However, the problem with student representatives was also observed in the case study that included face-to-face events as part of the course (Case Study 2). In this course, the efforts made by the team were not sufficient to enable the satisfactory working of this procedure, which may be not surprising given the existing difficulties in recruiting students representatives and overcoming their unwillingness to attend meetings which are recognised problems in full face-to-face courses (QAA, 2005). Regardless of these difficulties however, the issue is whether or not it would be possible to modify this procedure to make it suitable for the online environment; and furthermore, whether would it be possible to provide students with adequate representation in the online environment at all.

The research carried out by CHERI (HEFCE, 2003) regards student representation as one mechanism which higher education institutions have implemented to collect feedback from students. According to the accounts provided by the staff and students interviewed, they understood the role of student representatives in this way. It would be possible however to see this mechanism not only as a feedback tool, as from the point of view of student unions, representation is different from feedback (Howe, 2005). Using this distinction it would be possible to analyse the role of student representatives in online courses in relation

to their capacity to provide feedback to the course team; and also in relation to their capacity to represent the 'voice' of students in a more general way, in decision-making situations regarding the course. From a quality assurance point of view, both roles would be equally relevant.

It was interesting to find from the analysis of the data that students were not concerned about lacking a representative for their courses, as they felt the relationship they had established with their tutors was enough for them as a conduit for feedback, comments and complaints. This may represent a shift in terms of what student representation means for online students and it also provides a different context in which this mechanism is based. As a mechanism for getting feedback from students, student representatives would be the only other formal strategy, in addition to module evaluations, set up for this purpose within the courses. Considering the difficulties observed in getting student feedback through module evaluations, the role of student representatives acquires more relevance. From the feedback-gathering point of view, student representatives may be a difficult mechanism to implement in the online environment. But it may be possible to think of other ways in which student feedback can be gathered in addition to student surveys. Online events as carried out at specific times in Case Study 3, used to gather feedback regarding particular aspects of the course are an alternative strategy. Other examples include having an online space where students can post their comments any time, as in Case Study 1; or taking advantage of the tutors' closer relationship with students to gather feedback through them. The CHERI's report (HEFCE, 2003) indicates however that the 'feed forward' character of the feedback provided by student representatives is a feature that is difficult to obtain through other means. A probable challenge is then to articulate feedback mechanisms in which students are encouraged to look towards the future rather than only evaluating the past.

On the other hand, student representatives as a strategy for the 'representation of the student voice' is perhaps more challenging for the online environment. Although the particularly strong relationships with the tutors are beneficial, they cannot be considered an equivalent tool for a student representation mechanism in course-related discussion and decision-making situations. For this purpose, occasional face-to-face meetings with students (that would be able to attend) may be the only way forward, like the annual residency event that students from Case Study 3 were requesting.

Team meetings

Team meetings played a key role as a mechanism for coordinating, monitoring and dealing with the daily running of courses, particularly where teams were scattered rather than centrally located. Courses tended to have different types of meetings as part of their organisation, but here the focus of this analysis is limited to those meetings where academics, tutors and other administrative and support staff get together to review the state of affairs regarding how the courses were running, and for dealing with any issues that had arisen. Also it includes the meetings where materials were reviewed. Meetings such as examination boards have been left out of this analysis.

Team meetings were revealed as very different in each of the cases under study. The way in which course teams organised themselves seemed to be affected by the number and location of the members of staff and also by the style of leadership of the course directors. These factors seemed to affect the levels of formalisation, the frequency of the meeting, the mode of communication and ultimately the level of detail with which the courses were dealt.

Among the case studies, Case Study 1 had a very well-structured system of team meetings in place. This course carried out several regular meetings, which were well-defined and properly organised, each focusing on different aspects of the course: quality meetings for analysing the course under their quality framework; team meetings to deal with more administrative aspects in relation to other activities in the department; peer review meetings to review the materials and activities of modules. All the tutors participated in all of the meetings. In addition, they had established an online space where they had daily interactions regarding the course. These meetings were feasible as all the staff on the course were on wider contracts that included other activities in the department.

A contrasting situation emerged in two of the other case studies which revealed a rather unstructured system of meetings. In the first of these cases (Case Study 2), the team was very small and not all of the staff had full-time contracts. This made meetings difficult to organise as one of the tutors lived outside the city. They had carried out some online meetings but only when it was necessary to do so. Interestingly this course had two co-leaders who met weekly to work through all their projects, amongst which was the course, and in some ways it seemed that most of the decisions were taken by them. They nevertheless met with the rest of the team at least once a year. These occasions were regarded as good opportunities to discuss the course, although as a team they relied heavily

on informal online exchanges. The second case (Case Study 3) presents some different features as the course had quite a large team, mostly related to the course in a specific role (like module leaders or tutors) that demanded only a few hours of dedication each week. They may or not have belonged to the same department that was delivering the course. Many of them were external people brought in for a specific role. This situation made gathering all course staff together in meetings rather difficult, and was emphasised by the fact that they did not like to meet:

> I have to say there is a mindset.... an ethos in [the department] that in general meetings are a waste of time. Now I think that that's become a little bit outdated as the group has grown, and the group has grown, probably doubled in size in the last two or three years so I think probably you might feel think we need more meetings probably in [the department], but there is this ethos, that we don't have meetings [..] unless they are quite important .... so that means that it doesn't make it easy to have lots and lots of meetings and I mean..... and when we do have the meetings they tend to be quite long. (Staff, Case Study 3)

The major difference with the previous case is that the course leader here relied mostly on module leaders and tutors' capacity to do their work on their own without any major coordination from the director. The key evidence to support this view lay with the different or incomplete accounts provided by different staff members regarding some aspects of the course. In some cases, staff members were even managing incorrect information. Some examples of this miscommunication amongst members of staff were: staff believing a module evaluation was in place and regularly completed by students while there was no form in place; tutors not knowing whether students had a representative; or precisely where module information for students was provided.

In this case study (Case Study 3), online communications also had a role, but it was used much more sporadically. In the previous year, the team had organised an online seminar with tutors to discuss and obtain their feedback regarding some specific aspects of the course. Although they regarded the experience as very useful, it was a one-off occasion.

The fourth case study (Case Study 4) highlights a different scenario as in this case there were no team meetings related to particular courses. Meetings were held by the unit's management team which would tackle issues related to all courses. In this case, tutors were found to be quite detached from the course organisation, not knowing how some aspects of their particular module were managed. Consequently, since the level of detail with which courses were monitored was insufficient, this case study was not analysed in the same way as the other three.

When staff across all the case studies were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of their team meetings as a mechanism for identifying and resolving quality issues related to the courses, they indicated that most of this activity was done by informal contact with people they would meet in casual settings (e.g. the corridor, a common office, a phone call or an occasional e-mail). They all seemed to agree however that formalisation was important, as clearly expressed by one tutor:

> ...okay maybe you identified the issues through an informal conversation in the corridor but then if you don't have a structure to plug it into they somehow get lost... (Staff, Case Study 1)

The absence of a structure of formal meetings in this sense would put at risk the team's capacity to deal with the issues identified and the monitoring of their resolution.

One general feature that seems to have characterised the way course teams coordinated and organised themselves was the strong reliance on online communications. Even in the course that had the most structured and regular system of face-to-face meetings (Case Study 1), online communications among staff were estimated by one tutor to represent fifty percent of their overall interaction as a team. What distinguished the different case studies from each other was the level of formality with which this online communication was taking place, varying from informal e-mails to well-established online discussion boards and seminars. Although this may seem a natural feature for an online course, it seemed that online communications for this purpose needed to be well-coordinated and eventually backed up by face-to-face meetings in order to be fully effective.

As was indicated earlier, the main effect that the lack of regular team meetings was having on the courses was on the level of coordination and consistency in the information managed by the different members of the teams, which may have also affected the overall monitoring of quality in the courses. An example of this was the module evaluation application in Case Study 3; the lack of coordination in this team led the course to miss the application of the module evaluation. This would have been picked up more easily if regular meetings were held to monitor the course. Meetings however were not in themselves a mechanism that assured an effective monitoring; this seemed to also be dependant on an appropriate leadership:

> ...and that is that probably the ongoing biggest issue for me and this came into that.... either that questionnaire wasn't used last year [...] ...as with most things it probably depends on me chasing around finding out what went wrong last year. (Staff, Case Study 3)

In this particular case study (Case Study 3) this lack of coordination and monitoring also affected the quality of the learning materials produced in the first year, something the team only became aware of after they had been released to the students.

Considering the contexts from which these case studies were selected – campus-based higher education institutions – it seems that online course teams were not only composed of campus-based staff, but increasingly by fee-based, contracted academics and tutors working from home or elsewhere. This situation resulted in dispersed course teams and course leaders seemed unaware and hence unprepared, to cope with the coordination requirements of such distributed teams.

This situation was particularly evident when reviewing the mechanisms courses had for collecting feedback from their tutors. Where staff were mostly based on-campus and hence where face-to-face meetings were held regularly, tutors were fully-integrated in the running of the course and habitually feeding back their views regarding the modules and students. By contrast, in those courses where more off-campus tutors were in charge of running the different modules, and there were very few or no formal mechanisms to gather their feedback on a regular basis, the courses tended to split up into different sections running almost independently from each other. In these cases, course leaders had mostly anecdotal information on which to base their decisions on. As one course leader explained:

> There is an atmosphere that people just let me know if there are problems and that is actually quite healthy and I suppose that you probably just relied on that and certainly well we have been still developing but I think we definitely need in… not just a feedback on materials and the pedagogical stuff that just generally for better sort of establishing feedback mechanism where we are not depending on just ad hoc people doing all things. (Staff, Case Study 3)

The above situation suggests that teams on online courses within campus-based higher education institutions may not be prepared to cope with a distributed team, maintaining the same mechanisms for coordination and feedback as if all staff were on-campus – trusting informal encounters to be the main source for the discussion of issues related to the course.

Overall, as revealed in the above analysis, course teams' operation was affected by several of the features that characterise online programmes: the disaggregated structure of courses which demanded well-established coordination and communication strategies; the style of leadership displayed by the course leader; and the position they had within their own institutions.

Robinson (2004) gives a fairly detailed account of the organisational challenges of e-learning in traditional campus-based institutions that affect the way quality assurance procedures are applied, and which in her view have resulted in an additional feature of online courses, which is their tendency to set up informal arrangements within the institution, mainly as a consequence of the marginal status of the courses. These informal arrangements were also a feature found on the courses under study and this was particularly noticeable in Case Study 2, in which the course team had developed their own procedures for several administrative processes, and hence strengthened their peripheral position.

How effective team meetings of online courses were at assuring and enhancing the quality of their programmes seemed to be dependent on the level of awareness the team members had of the aspects affecting them and their capacity to implement the appropriate adjustments to overcome the limitations posed by the online environment. These adjustments usually took the form of increasing the formalisation of the communication and coordination channels. Case study 1 for example, revealed a good level of organisation and coordination of the team, and as they were aware of the limitations of time and location that they had as a group, they had established several communication channels (face-to-face meetings, online spaces) through which the team kept in permanent contact. In this case however the fact that most tutors were participating in other activities in the institution, and specifically within the department in charge of the course, greatly facilitated a smooth and intense collaboration among the course team. In contrast, Case Study 3 portrayed a different situation where the course team was largely distributed and the course leader had not implemented any formal arrangements around which to organise, communicate and coordinate the team, which were instead carried out primarily in informal settings or on one-off occasions.

From the case studies it is not possible to suggest one way to improve the effectiveness of the meetings at the level of the coordination and communication strategies; it is possible, however, to provide an overview of two different scenarios that an online course can present. One scenario is where most of the team is based at the university site, facilitating the coordination and communication extensively amongst its members as face-to-face meetings could be held on a regular basis, as shown in Case Studies 1 and 2. The alternative scenario is where the course team is relatively spread around the site or the country and/or their contributions are based on part-time contracts, impeding face-to-face encounters, like

in Case Studies 3 and 4. The effectiveness of the teams' coordination and communication systems, however, did not seem to rely on the option of meeting face-to-face or not. Rather, the effectiveness seemed to be linked to the level of formalisation with which the coordination and communication strategies were implemented, regardless of whether they were face-to-face or online. Formalisation in this context is understood as meetings (online or face-to-face) having clear goals and agendas, with clear responsibilities assigned to the members of the team, and keeping records of decisions and actions. In this way, formalisation seems to be, together with the presence of strong leadership, a key element for effective coordination and communication among team members that would facilitate reviewing, keeping track and resolving the issues arising from the running of the course.

Consequently, the role that team meetings were performing as a quality assurance strategy seems to be related to the level of formality of the meetings themselves, either online or face-to-face. From the case studies it is possible to suggest this correlation as the cases which had more structured and frequent meetings tended to include a greater proportion of 'Teaching and learning', 'Resources' and 'Student support' aspects of the programme in their agendas. In this way, meetings were not only working as monitoring mechanisms, but also as a place to discuss the course and take decisions towards its improvement.

This review has also highlighted the impact that the issue of staff's contractual relationship with the institution was having on the management of the teams. The tendency of higher education institutions to incorporate external or specialised units as a way to enhance the expertise of the course team (CVCP, 2000) is not only related to the incorporation of people with specific skills needed for the development of the course (like learning technologists or multimedia developers) but also to the way institutions are building up the academic teams. In the cases under study, it was noticeable that in all the courses, external academic staff were part of the teams; and these people were in a way strengthening the disaggregated nature of the teams as they usually worked for the course at a distance.

In this context, the persistent recommendation of the need for a project-based approach to the management of teams made by Bates (2000; 2004) becomes more significant, as it would facilitate the coordination of distributed and multi-disciplinary teams. However, what was happening with team meetings could be analysed in parallel to what was discussed earlier regarding module evaluations in relation to the tendency of these mechanisms towards a more bureaucratic form (Barnett, 1994b). As team meetings became more difficult to carry out, with more staff unable to attend, they tended to lose their

reflective nature, becoming a more administrative coordination and management space. The implications for quality assurance and particular for quality enhancement are significant. Most probably Bates' (2000; 2004) suggestion of a project-based approach could solve the administrative management challenges of online learning, but would not necessarily be the answer to an appropriate quality management.

Summary

The analysis of the quality assurance procedures in relation to their specific effectiveness to assure and enhance quality, indicate that three of these mechanisms were the most strongly affected by the online modality of the courses. These were module evaluations, student representation and team meetings.

Module evaluations were found to be affected by the remote location of the students which impacted on the response rates; but more importantly the enhancement function of module evaluations were found to be severely affected by the distributed organisation of the teams and the resulting ambiguity in the allocation of responsibilities, which in turn impacted on the appropriate management of students' feedback, and can also be linked to the isolated position that the online courses had within their institutions.

The remote location of students clearly affected the implementation of student representatives as well. It was interesting to find however, that online and mixed-mode students were not missing the role of student representatives, as they felt the relationships established with their tutors were close enough for the tutors to work as the main channel for putting their comments and complaints forward.

The role that team meetings were performing as a quality assurance strategy was found to be greatly affected by the level of formality of the meetings themselves, either online or face-to-face. This level of formality of meetings depended also on the number and location of the members of staff and the style of leadership of the course directors. Overall, the impact that the issue of staff's contractual relationship with the institution was having on the management of the teams was highlighted in the analysis, suggesting that teams seemed unprepared for the necessary coordination that distributed teams needed.

In contrast, annual reviews seemed to be implemented in online courses with no major variations, and the problems found in its effectiveness for quality assurance and

enhancement cannot be directly related to the online mode of delivery.

Similarly, the data gathered regarding external examiners did not provide enough evidence to indicate their role and quality of feedback to the course teams was being affected by the online mode of the courses.

In the next section, the main characteristics of online courses found to be affecting the implementation and particularly the enhancement function of the quality assurance mechanisms are discussed in detail, to explore the ways in which these procedures could be adapted to improve its effectiveness for this new mode of delivery.

Quality assurance procedures: issues affecting their effective implementation

The main features that characterise online courses within dual-mode higher education institutions that appeared to be affecting the quality assurance procedures in place in the courses under study were: the position that these courses had within their own institutions; the distributed configuration of the course teams and the remote location of students.

Regarding the position that courses had within their organisations, the four case studies each had an interesting relationship with their own institutions. In general, course teams regarded themselves as rather isolated from the institution-wide processes. This feeling of isolation had sometimes originated in the fact that course teams were actually running the course in coordination with external units, which was the case for three of the case studies (Case Studies 1, 3 and 4). However all cases presented this isolated position, which largely emerged from the feeling that their courses were representing a non-mainstream activity. This isolated position of the courses could be considered as a positive one in the sense that it gave course teams the space to take their own decisions, an aspect acknowledged as beneficial by staff. Therefore, from what on the outside could be seen as isolation, in practice was perceived as autonomy (Hoecht, 2006). All course teams in this study were actually experiencing little pressure from their institutions' senior managers to follow the quality assurance procedures in place for all other courses, which provided them with the autonomy to carry out their programmes with no major interference. They may have been trying to apply the institution-wide procedures, or had definitively given up as the procedures were not easily transferable to the online context. In any case, this lack of compliance did not bring about any consequences for the courses or the teams. The other

face of this autonomy was the informal arrangement set up by course teams to cope with this isolated position (Robinson, 2004), expressed by the teams as not having the appropriate support from the central services of the institution, and explicitly expressed by Case Study 2 and Case Study 4 staff. This situation was worsened by the teams' perception of senior management as being unable to deal with their concerns and problems, corroborating the observations made by authors regarding the difficult position that quality assurance of e-learning presents within dual-mode institutions (CVCP, 2000; Robinson, 2004).

This more independent position, and lighter pressure to comply with the regulations, were also visible in the different levels of formalisation of the strategies for collecting feedback from the participants, particularly from students and tutors. A good example was found in Case Study 3, where the institution had not formally requested any information and consequently, the collection of feedback relied on the course team's willingness to carry out any evaluation process, which led to the organisation of informal encounters and online seminars to collect opinions regarding particular topics of concern for staff. The collection of feedback was even more informal in respect of tutors, and the course team relied heavily on tutors approaching them if there were any issues to discuss. Only one event for collecting feedback from tutors had been carried out in the last three years.

The isolated position presented by courses raises questions regarding the extent to which academic staff were being autonomous or just left on their own by the institutional management. But more importantly it raises questions regarding how significant online courses – and the quality of them – are for dual-mode institutions. According to the multiple accounts of the forces that originated the move of campus-based higher education institutions to adopt new forms of delivery (Tait and Mills, 1999; Brennan and Shah, 2000), the expansion and diversification of the system and the need to satisfy the needs of students have been mentioned as the main drivers. It is however noticeable that the main forces which related to the use of technology were primarily coming from government initiatives, first with the TLTP and the TQEF programmes, and then the e-strategies in the last few years (HEFCE, 2001; HEFCE, 2005a). Adding these elements to the analysis of the results it seems reasonable to ask whether institutions consider themselves as dual-mode. From the cases analysed it appears that the online courses are still too much on the sidelines and off the senior management's agenda for the institutions to consider themselves as dual-mode; online course's teams enjoy a degree of autonomy that

sometimes probably verges on abandonment; senior management is perceived to be unaware of the challenges that the delivery of online courses imply; and quality assurance procedures do not seem to be enforced with the same rigour as could be assumed for campus-based courses. According to this, it could be suggested that the process of adoption of online learning by campus-based institutions is still largely an externally driven process which has not yet permeated the overall structure, leaving the concept of dual-mode institutions as just a label applied from the outside.

A second feature observed on these courses was the distributed configuration of the teams, which was the main distinctive characteristic of the online environment highlighted by Harvey (2002) and Connolly et al. (2005) as generating particular issues for quality assurance and enhancement. Course teams were not, and probably could not be in charge of all the tasks involved in the running of an online course. Most of the case studies were working in collaboration with external units that were providing specific services (like admissions, material development and VLE support), that added further complexity to the organisation of the teams.

The distribution of teams found in the case studies was primarily a division of tasks. Course teams presented a similar division of tasks, usually distinguishing between academic, technical and administrative roles. In some cases, academic roles were also divided between academic staff leading the course and the tutors. As was noted in the results, course teams revealed different organisational patterns, which meant that although individuals were carrying out different roles, it did not necessarily mean they were working separately. Case Study 1 for example, had a rather small team within which members had different roles but would generally operate as a unit; a contrasting example was Case Study 3 where the team of academics was separated from the team that developed the materials, and also separated from the team of tutors. The distribution of the teams observed however was not only related to roles but also to location. The nature of these courses allowed teams to have academics and tutors in locations away from the campus site.

Both types of distribution, of roles and locations, left gaps in the teams' organisation that required special attention in order to reduce the risks they introduced for an effective implementation of the quality assurance procedures. These risks were mostly related to the effects that a lack of coordination and communication had on the implementation of procedures such as module evaluations and team meetings. Case Study 4 provides evidence of this situation. As revealed in the interviews, tutors were mainly located off-campus,

spread across the country. This meant that most of them were unable to attend the meetings organised by the central team, not only because of their distance but also because they had to pay their own expenses. This distance however was not only physical; the central team's difficulties in communicating properly with the team of tutors were revealed during the interviews, where staff usually had incomplete information about the course; for example, it was found that tutors were not aware that a module evaluation was part of the materials received by students.

There was a further aspect in which this distributed configuration of teams affected the implementation of the quality assurance mechanisms. As Harvey (2002) indicates, the disaggregated organisation of teams may cause responsibility to move between parties, and hence issues are at risk of becoming the responsibility of no one person. This is particularly relevant in terms of the ownership of the quality of the course. Case Study 3 provides a good example of the way in which they managed the application of the module evaluations, where one part of the team assumed the other part would take care of sending the form out to students, and vice versa, and which finally resulted in the course being left without this feedback. In the same way, the lack of quality control over the materials developed for this course also shows how the distribution of the team roles affected the application of quality control mechanisms. In this case study, the team included an external unit, and this probably added a higher level of complexity to the distribution of responsibilities. However, this configuration of teams, including external units and/or those with more distributed team roles, is becoming more frequent within dual-mode universities, as campus-based course teams tend to collaborate with external/specialised organisations as a way to incorporate the expertise in online learning which they may not have within the university (CVCP, 2000).

The style of leadership observed in course leaders was strongly related to the distributed configuration of the teams. It also affected the application of the procedures, which seemed to impact directly on the level of coordination of the teams. With an increasing number of external and part-time staff, the lack of strong coordination can be immediately visible in the accuracy and completeness of the information managed by members of staff. The courses analysed were clearly contrasting in this area. Case Study 1 had a strong leadership and team members had clear roles and responsibilities; and in the interviews it was apparent that the accounts from all members of the team were very consistent and complete. In contrast, Case Study 3 had a much more distributed team and a more

delegated style of leadership; in this course the accounts gathered in the staff interviews were diverse, sometimes incomplete and inaccurate.

What seemed to be a characteristic of all these courses was that, as they were located within on-campus higher education institutions, teams tended to organise themselves in a way so that each member had the autonomy to run their part of the course somewhat independently, following the pattern of face-to-face organisational settings, where course leaders mainly work on their own, relying on the autonomy of each other's staff members, and where most of the interaction is carried out in informal settings as all members of the team are located on-campus (Robinson, 2004). This style of organisation was more evident in Case Study 3 where the course team was quite large in number, distributed across the campus (in different departments) and across the country. The course leader expected every tutor to deal autonomously with the module under their responsibility and to only contact her if necessary. This approach resulted in several problems of miscommunication among the members of the staff, as well as misinformation, as was revealed in the interviews and recognised by the course leader.

It is evident from this analysis that in order to maintain a level of consistency in the courses and carry out effective mechanisms for feedback, a stronger and more explicit coordination effort is required. Robinson (2004) gives a detailed list of the organisational issues that 'traditional' on-campus universities should consider when running online courses. One issue is the need for stronger coordination as a result of the increasing number of administrative tasks that are involved in online learning. This suggestion relates to Bates' (2000; 2004) proposal to adopt a project-based approach in managing e-learning. Bates advises that although a project manager is needed to run e-learning successfully, it may not necessarily be the leading academic who performs this role, suggesting an organisational setting closer to that seen in large open and distance universities (Tait, 1997).

This new team organisation required for a successful delivery of online learning raises a more general question about whether campus-based universities have the flexibility to incorporate these alternatives structures. The study carried out by Pollock and Cornford (2000) shows the difficulties that universities have in dealing with the cross-functional management and multiplicity of actors that the use of technology demands. According to their analysis, the problem is the 'very institution of the university' (Pollock and Cornford, 2000). Foster et al. (2002) reach a similar conclusion after analysing the institutional readiness for networked learning, suggesting external collaboration as the way forward to

support the adoption and institutionalisation of networked learning.

In the courses which were part of this study, three of them did have external collaborations aimed at enhancing their expertise in online provision. This collaboration however did not seem to have reduced the impact that distributed teams and leadership style had on their quality management. On the contrary, this feature seemed to have added an extra layer of complexity to the organisation and management of the courses. It might be necessary then to look inside the institution to analyse its capacity to adapt to the organisational demands of online learning. In this sense, the institutional organisation and experience that open and distance universities have could provide the pointers as to how this integration can be implemented (Johnston, 1999).

The third feature of these courses heavily impacting on the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures was the physical distance of students. This distance puts the students in an isolated position in relation to the course. Apart from the interactions they have online, students do not 'know each other' in the same way as face-to-face meetings would allow. It could be argued that in face-to-face courses students are equally unknown to each other; nevertheless the feeling students may get from seeing each other's faces may be different from what they get by reading each other's postings. Thus students perceived themselves as being 'on their own' rather than being part of a group. This sense of isolation was observed in students on all courses, including the one that included face-to-face encounters. Aside from the obvious effect that physical distance and its isolated sense may have on the quality assurance procedures, such as the impossibility of attending meetings or the difficulties in getting student feedback, it was also observed that distance affected the relationship that students established with their tutors, which was much stronger than expected. Students felt they could talk directly with their tutors about everything, with no need for intermediaries. In this sense, it could be suggested that the online environment affords a more 'egalitarian' relationship between tutors and students (Hodgson, 2002), where tutors compensate for the lack of control they would otherwise have over the students by building closer relationships, despite the physical distance. This more equal relationship may be supported by the lack of physical and oral clues which would facilitate the establishment of more hierarchical roles in face-to-face settings.

This strong and more equal relationship between students and tutors is a well-known feature of online environments (Wegner and Holloway, 1999; Oliver and Herrington, 2003), and it is sometimes claimed as becoming a learning community in Wenger's

understanding of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Kirkup (2002) however challenges this assumption by questioning whether the networks that are established online are communities at all. This could be challenged further by asking whether they are networks at all as the main relationship that is established is student-tutor, and somehow, the relationship among students does not seem to be of similar relevance as the relationship established with tutors, as was revealed by the students' interviews. This 'closeness' raises a further issue, related to the role that tutors seemed to have in the courses. Tutors were perceived as representing 'the course' for the students, as this was the main relationship developed within the online environment; consequently, and linking back to the organisation of teams, this suggests the need for course teams to maintain strong coordination and communication with tutors – who might also be at a distance – to deliver a consistent message to students.

Missed opportunities

From the distinctive features of online courses drawn from the literature, their visibility or availability for inspection was not easily identified as affecting the implementation of the quality assurance procedures in the case studies analysed. Harvey (2002) argues that e-learning allows more in-depth quality monitoring, as online courses are more available for examination than face-to-face courses. This increased visibility of online courses would, according to Fielding et al. (2004), impact on how easy it is to carry out quality reviews, and also on how these reviews are recorded (CVCP, 2000). In the courses under study there was no evidence to demonstrate this impact. On the contrary, it seemed that revealing course aspects required a simple yet different type of method, yet course teams seemed unprepared to collect the data. An example of this was the collection of feedback from tutors. On those courses in particular where tutors were not part of the main core team – for example Case Studies 3 and 4 – and/or they were carrying out their roles at a distance, the courses had no formal strategy for collecting their feedback, which reduced the amount of information that the core team managed regarding specific students or units of the courses. In some cases the availability of this data would have significantly improved the information used by the course teams and hence their decision making processes. A similar situation was observed on the use of the tools provided by the virtual learning environments to monitor students' progress and participation. Surprisingly the smaller courses (in terms of numbers of students and tutors, as in Case Studies 1 and 2) were the

ones making use of the tools in some way, while bigger courses, for which the tools would had been a useful mechanism to identify overall patterns, were not making full use of these tools. This illustrates the under-utilisation of the capacity of the virtual learning environment to provide more details of the processes.

The issue of equivalency for courses, similar to that of availability for inspection, was not seen as a relevant issue in the application of the quality assurance procedures. The presence of the equivalency issue between online and face-to-face courses was mentioned in relation to two aspects: the parameters set by some of the quality assurance mechanisms to ask course teams to review their online courses; and the equivalence of assessment. None of them however were directly affecting the effectiveness of the procedures themselves; the parameters, for example, of module evaluations, had already been adapted for the online environment; and the parameters for the annual review forms were not thought to be affecting the review process. Additionally, external examiners were somehow considered as a mechanism to retain equivalence, as they were providing an external perspective in relation to other courses in the same discipline, whether online or not. The only case study that had a parallel campus-based version (Case Study 3), with the same external examiner for both courses, was already considering having different examiners for each mode of delivery. This course team took the issue of equivalency between both courses very seriously, but delivery of equivalency was focused on having the same examination for both courses. There were no concerns expressed regarding an equivalence of the students' learning experience, which the team considered nevertheless to be of better quality than the one provided for on-campus students. The team's argument to support this conclusion was their own perception of the facilities and materials that the online course was providing to students, such as constant access to tutors, and the capability of reviewing the course content at their own pace. The team considered however that many students were not actually taking advantage of these features of the course. What is interesting was that although the team had the option to, they did not carry out a more in-depth investigation into whether these perceived benefits were actually being delivered to students by taking advantage of the increased visibility. This tendency was observed in most courses, as mentioned above; course teams were not taking advantage of this feature to gather more evidence regarding the quality of the courses. It seemed as if course teams were not interested in looking for further evidence regarding the equivalence of the learning experience, as usually their focus on the analysis was on the outcomes, which was represented by the assessment.

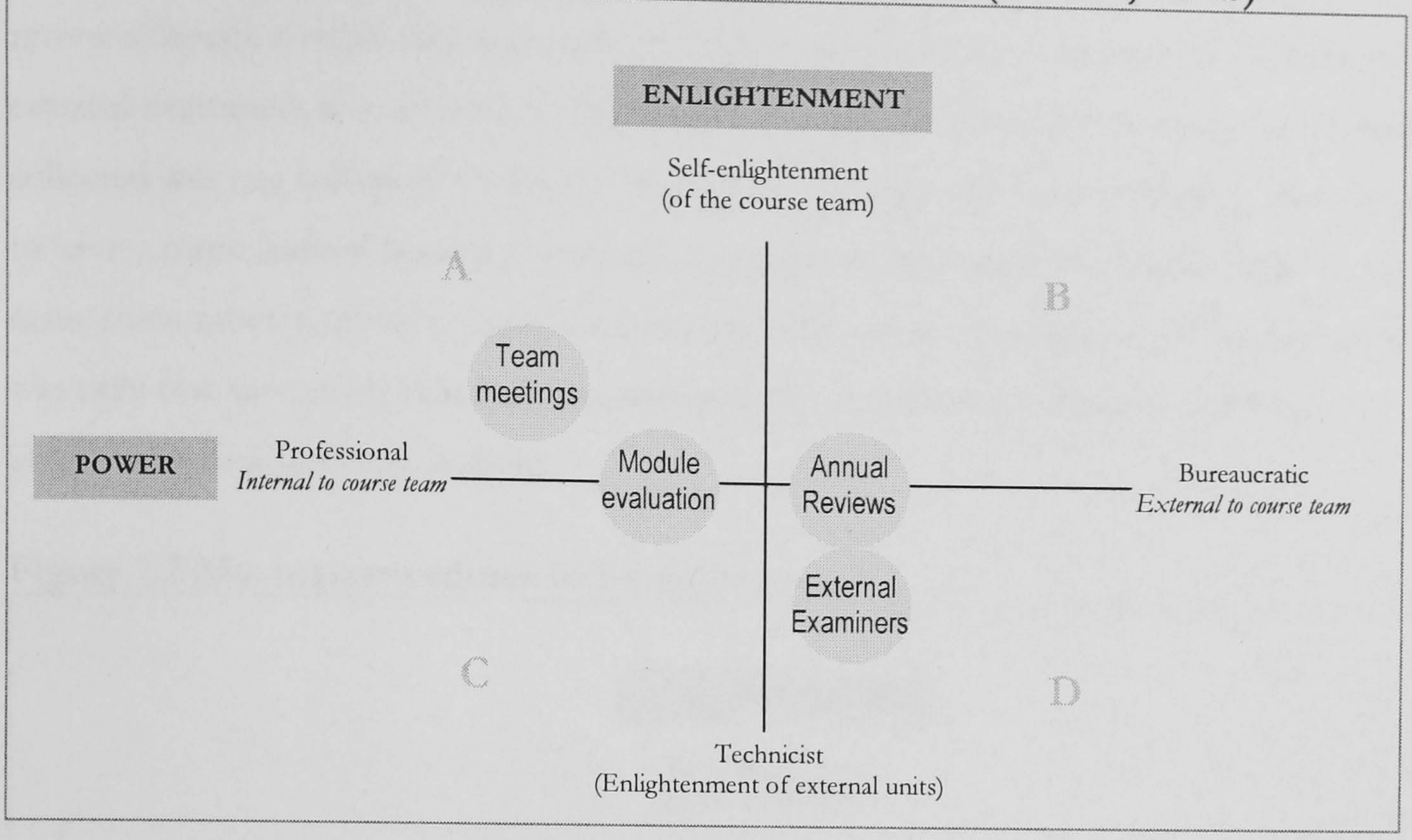
As discussed above, equivalence of courses and openness for review were not found to have any relevant impact in the application of the quality assurance procedures in the cases under study. Although only availability for inspection is a feature of the online environment, and equivalence is an issue which might be considered to be affecting how quality assurance processes were being carried out, their lack of impact seemed to be related to the focus of the mechanisms themselves. The increased visibility of the online courses was mainly linked to the chance to more directly observe how the learning and teaching processes were carried out and to monitor progress, which course teams were not benefiting from. On the other hand, the issue of equivalence only appeared to be relevant in relation to the assessment strategies. This parallel between these two issues raises the point that the central focus of the quality assurance mechanisms seems to be on the outcomes rather than on the course processes.

Quality assurance procedures: mapping their enhancement function

The analysis of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures revealed a tension between the compliance of the regulation versus its enhancement function. It seems that the online modality was putting more strain on the capacity of the teams and the courses as a whole in using these mechanisms not only as tools for monitoring, but to improve the quality of the teaching and learning experience. Barnett's (1994b) framework for the analysis of the procedures gives more insight into how this tension worked in the cases reviewed in this study. Although it would be possible to suggest a map for each case study, the positioning of the procedures have been made based on how the mechanisms tended to function in the online courses in an integrated manner, as analysed above.

The application of this framework was slightly adapted to make it more meaningful to the context and purpose of this analysis. Barnett's (1994b) original axes represented the tension between academe and external agencies which were influencing the application of the mechanisms; for example, the 'power' axis represented the location of the ownership of the procedures, which could be external to the institution (bureaucratic) or internal to the academic institution (professional). For the purpose of this discussion it seemed more relevant to make this distinction at the level of the course, and to differentiate between the procedures that were under the control of the course teams as opposed to the ones imposed by the institution's management or externally.

Figure 7.1 Mapping of procedures into Barnett's matrix (Barnett, 1994b)



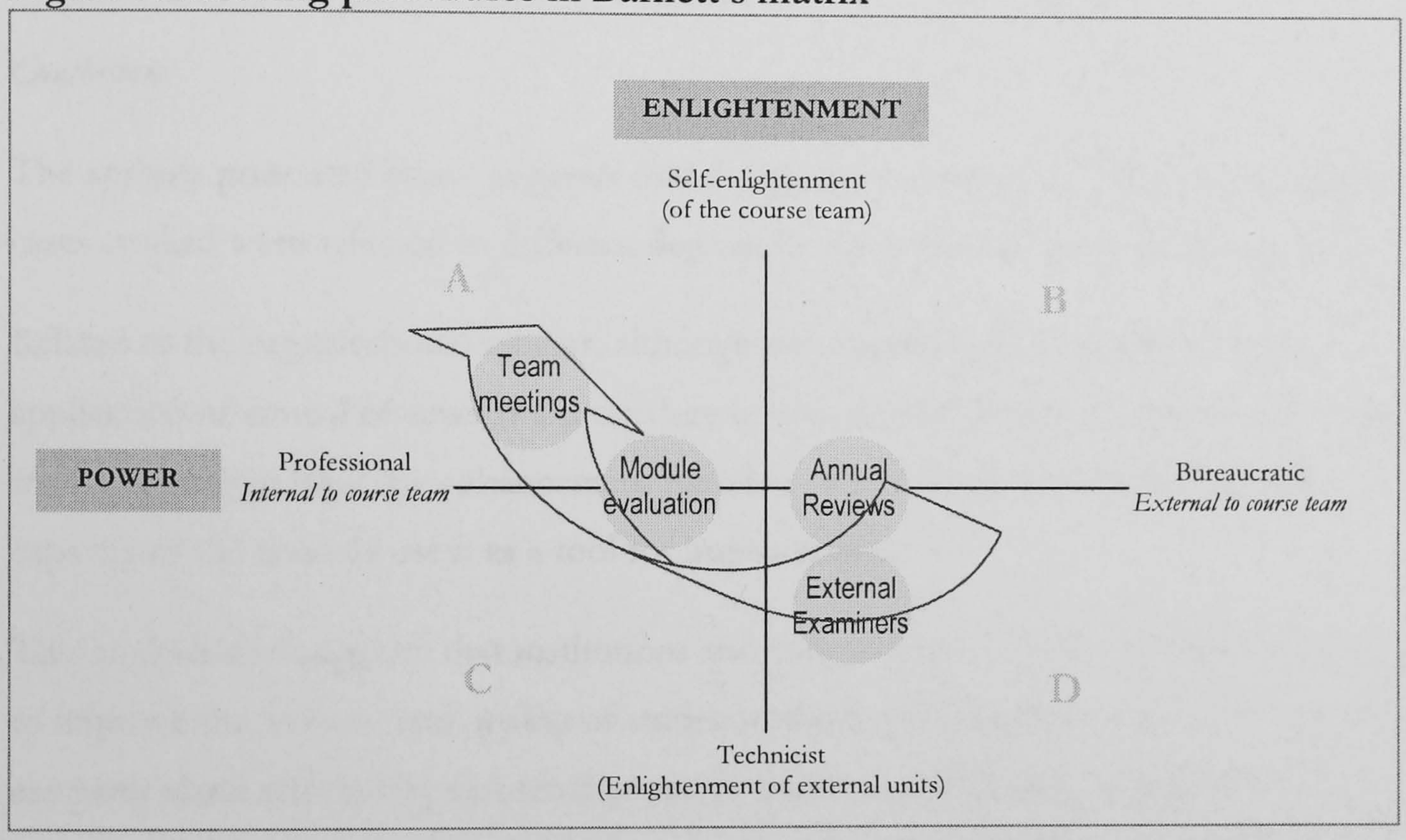
The resulting map (Figure 7.1) of procedures gives the overall view that the quality assurance mechanisms tended to be more self-enlightening for course teams when they were more properly owned and controlled by them, as with team meetings, which is probably the mechanism that provided the most valuable insight to staff regarding the course, despite the problems associated with the disaggregated character of team roles and locations discussed earlier; the positioning of team meetings within quadrant A (top-left of the grid) responds to the fact that these meetings tended to be identified across case studies as a mechanism which staff would have a greater sense of ownership compared with the other procedures. Its potential to be a self-enlightening for the course team also seemed to be high (as in Case Study 1) however its position in the grid is lowered as the level of formality, teams' size and contractual relation with the institution, as well as its geographical distribution seriously affected this potential.

Module evaluations were positioned in between sections A and C of the grid; as a mechanism – compared with team meetings – course teams felt having less control over module evaluations, and might have had the same potential for enlightening their enhancement activities. However, the observed lack of analysis of the results made them less useful for the teams.

Annual reviews and the role of external examiners were difficult to place; both tended to be seen as more externally controlled by the course teams than the other procedures;

annual reviews however were considered as a useful mechanism during the process of review although overall they were mainly carried out for external observers. The role of external examiners was difficult to define in terms of their value for the teams as the data collected was not sufficient to draw a clear picture of this aspect; nevertheless, they seemed to have a more limited benefit for the course teams as they were usually restricted to the assessment aspects of the courses. Student representatives were left out of the grid as there was only one case study that had implemented this procedure, and hence there was insufficient data to position them.

Figure 7.2 Moving procedures in Barnett's matrix



From the above map it is possible to suggest that quality assurance procedures in the context of online courses are still not working fully at the service of the course teams' development. In this sense, the procedures that were owned and under the control of the teams seemed to be the ones which worked better as quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms. From this, it could be further suggested that quality assurance procedures would be of greater benefit as course teams increase their sense of ownership and control over them, in which case, the challenge would focus on defining the way and the extent to which the online features of the courses impact on this possibility and either facilitate or obstruct this process. Taking the earlier analysis of the aspects affecting the enhancement function of the procedures in online courses, it would be possible to propose that a move towards an increased integration of online courses into the overall institutional

organisation, a more coordinated approach in the managing of the course teams, and taking further advantage of the relationship developed between students and tutors, could ultimately foster a greater ownership of the quality assurance procedures, and hence increase their enlightenment potential for the course team. This move could be represented graphically as shown in Figure 7.2, where the arrow represents the shift of the quality assurance procedures becoming more strongly owned by the course teams. The course teams would then become the target audience for the assurance process output, and in this way, strengthen the enhancement function of the procedures.

Conclusions

The analysis presented above suggests that the quality assurance mechanisms in place in the cases studied were affected to different degrees by the online modality of the courses.

Related to the organisational aspects, although not directly influencing the effective application of annual reviews as a procedure in online courses, there is evidence to suggest from the analysis, that the enhancement function of this mechanism relies upon the capacity of the team to use it as a tool for improvement.

This analysis also suggests that institutions and course teams should consider the strategies to improve the amount and quality of student opinions with particular care. Online courses are particularly affected by restricted access to students, which had a direct effect on the quantity of the feedback that could be gathered and the appropriate representation of their views. In this sense, it seems that student representation, in its present form is not a useful mechanism as a conduit to bring student opinions to the foreground. The data suggests however that the relationships established with tutors may be a route worth exploring for student representation.

From a general – and institutional – point of view, the results indicate that dual-mode higher education institutions should approach the quality assurance and enhancement of their online courses from a different organisational perspective. Online courses seem to require a stronger definition of coordination, communication and planning strategies, as well as a clearer definition of leadership than face-to-face courses. The absence or limited presence of any of these elements affected the effectiveness and enhancement functions of several of the procedures, such as team meetings and module evaluations.

Finally, Barnett's (1994b) framework for the analysis of the quality assurance mechanisms in place in online learning courses has proved to be a very useful tool to show the tension between assurance and enhancement roles of the procedures. It also facilitated, from the positioning of the procedures in the grid, the visualisation of some of the adjustments required to improve their effectiveness as quality enhancement mechanisms of online courses.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last two decades, higher education institutions have progressively introduced the use of technology as part of their strategies to improve the quality of their teaching and learning activities, to meet students' demands for flexibility and provision which is less time and place dependent. Simultaneously, major transformations in quality assurance took place in the higher education sector. The Quality Assurance Agency in England developed a set of required internal quality assurance mechanisms which all higher education institutions are required to use to assist them in the processes of assuring and enhancing the quality of the courses they offer.

This thesis is located in the convergence of these two processes, where the question raised was: are the quality assurance mechanisms which are operating in higher education institutions effective at assuring and enhancing the quality of online courses?

The exploratory studies carried out at the start of this project allowed the identification of three issues that represented potential tensions when applying quality assurance procedures to online courses. These were: availability for inspection; responsibility for quality; and equivalence of examinations. They were used as inputs to refine and define the research questions upon which the design of this project was formulated.

A case study approach was selected as the most appropriate strategy to carry out a deep examination of the quality assurance procedures as well as the features of the courses under study. This research strategy sought to identify the extent to which quality assurance procedures in the institutions under study were able to capture the aspects that characterise online courses.

The results and their discussion presented in the previous chapters have provided a rich description of the way in which the online features of the courses are affecting the enhancement function of the quality assurance procedures. Additionally it has enabled the mapping of a detailed characterisation of the institutional and managerial environment in which online courses and their teams are located, in addition to how these features are influencing the effective implementation of the quality assurance mechanisms.

Answering the research questions

The research questions were based on the assumption that current internal quality assurance procedures, applied in dual-mode universities, were not able to capture the totality of the aspects of online courses. Thus the need arose to identify the features of the online mode of delivery which were influencing the application of these procedures, with the aim of exploring how dual-mode higher education institutions approach the application of their internal quality assurance mechanisms to their online courses, to ensure and enhance quality effectively, and taking into account the differences imposed by the mode of delivery.

The question that led this enquiry was:

- Are quality assurance procedures used by dual-mode universities to ensure and enhance the quality of their online and mixed-mode courses effective?

Three subsidiary questions were also included:

- Which features of the online modality influence the capacity of the quality assurance procedures to capture the quality aspects of courses?
- What do team members do to assure and enhance the quality of the online course?
- What are the components in an online course that cannot be regarded as equivalent to the ones present in a face-to-face course?

The results of this study provide evidence to confirm that the quality assurance procedures in place in the cases under study were being affected by the online mode of delivery and, as a result, their effectiveness as tools for assuring and enhancing quality was being hindered. The quality assurance mechanisms most affected by the online delivery mode were module evaluations, student representatives and team meetings.

Answers to each of the research questions are presented in the following sections, starting with the three subsidiary questions referred to above.

Online features affecting the quality assurance procedures' capacity to capture the quality aspects

The results indicate that in the context of dual-mode higher education institutions, the

capacity of the quality assurance mechanisms to capture the quality aspects of online courses was affected mainly by the position that these courses had within their own institutions, the distributed configuration of the course teams and the distant location of students.

This enquiry revealed that online courses in dual-mode universities tended to be detached from mainstream activities within their institutions, creating both a sense of autonomy and isolation in the teams. This isolated position drove online courses off senior management's agendas and concerns, and more crucially for the application of the quality assurance mechanisms, away from the institutional pressures to comply with the regulations, usually leading to the failure of course teams to collect relevant information that would have supported their enhancement activities. In this respect, the isolated position of online courses led teams towards an approach driven by compliance rather than by quality enhancement, as teams tended to only comply with the regulations that were being enforced by senior management.

The second feature found to be affecting the quality assurance procedures was the distributed configuration of the course teams, in terms of roles and location. On the one hand, the distribution of roles affected the levels of coordination and communication among the members of the teams, which ultimately had an effect on the distribution of responsibilities and an appropriate application of the quality assurance procedures. The collaboration with external specialised organisations added further complexity to this distribution. On the other hand, the distributed location affected the quality of the coordination and communication among the team members, which was also influenced by the style of leadership shown by the course leaders. In this way, the distributed configuration of teams meant that courses were managing inaccurate and incomplete information, and they tended to overlook feedback from students and tutors.

Finally, the results showed that the distant location of students heavily affected the quality assurance mechanisms, particularly module evaluations and student representatives. The physical distance of students obstructed the implementation of these procedures in their current form, as students could not be 'forced' to provide feedback and were physically unable to attend staff meetings. This situation led teams to focus on the mechanisms' formalities (e.g. only sending students an evaluation). However they did not look for solutions to overcome the distance – despite sending evaluation forms out, they were not collecting students' responses to the evaluation and/or not analysing the data collected –

nor were they implementing alternative strategies. The case studies revealed that the distance was compensated for by a strong and trusting relationship between students and tutors, which would open up new ways of thinking about student involvement in online courses.

Teams' activities affecting the quality assurance and enhancement

As was mentioned earlier, the particular features of course teams affected the way and the extent to which quality was assured and enhanced. The distributed configuration and the need for strong and formal coordination and communication strategies clearly affected the way procedures were implemented, and especially, how feedback from students and tutors was collected and managed.

The management of quality was particularly affected by two aspects: the style of leadership of the course leader; and the tension between staff autonomy and coordination. The style of leadership was found to be directly impacting on the levels of coordination and communication shown by the teams, which usually included the dichotomy between staff autonomy and the need for strong coordination. This situation led to: miscommunication among staff; an unclear distribution of responsibilities; and a lack of ownership for the quality of the course.

One interesting finding was the identification of activities that staff were not doing for assuring and enhancing quality. The augmented opportunities for review offered by the online mode of delivery – its availability for inspection and the special relationship tutors had with students – were missed by staff. These omissions revealed the primacy of an approach to quality assurance centred in compliance rather than enhancement, as teams appeared unprepared to take advantage of these opportunities, reducing the information and resources available for enhancement.

Components of online courses regarded as not equivalent to the ones present in face-to-face courses

This question emerged from the exploratory studies carried out at the start of this project. In the analysis of the interviews to key quality assurance positions, equivalence of qualifications came up as an issue in the context of courses that had parallel versions (one

face-to-face and one online). The questions posed then asked whether it was possible to retain such equivalence, and furthermore, whether it was relevant to look for this equivalence.

The results of the enquiry can only provide preliminary indications about the issue of equivalence because only one case study had a parallel face-to-face version which provided limited data. In that particular case study, equivalence was maintained by applying the same assessment to both groups of students. The most interesting element in the analysis of that case study was that staff evolved from seeking equivalence at all costs, to a more flexible position where differences between the modes of deliveries had a value of their own, opening up the possibility to consider that online learning could be regarded as 'good' as or 'better' than face-to-face teaching and learning.

Overall, the issue of equivalence was not easy to identify in the analysis of the results. It was only mentioned in relation to: the parameters of the quality assurance mechanisms; and the equivalence of assessment, as mentioned above. External examiners were considered as a mechanism to retain equivalence as they would focus their review on the assessment aspects of the courses.

The approach of dual-mode universities for an effective application of quality assurance procedures to online and mixed-mode courses

The examination of the quality assurance procedures across the case studies showed how these mechanisms were being affected by the online mode of delivery, revealing the aspects that would need modification in order to improve their effectiveness as tools for assuring and enhancing quality.

Dual-mode higher education institutions need to tackle the tension between compliance and enhancement shown in the implementation of the quality assurance procedures. The analysis of the results under Barnett's (1994b) framework suggests the enhancement capacity of the quality assurance mechanisms would be made possible by increasing teams' power and sense of ownership over the procedures implemented in their courses. The characteristics of this process would vary depending on the mechanism under analysis:

- *Module evaluation*

  Course teams would need to address the quantity and quality of the feedback they are

getting from students through the module evaluations, but more importantly they would need to start analysing the data gathered and acting on it. The results indicate that course teams need to resolve any ambiguity in their allocation of responsibilities to make sure module evaluations are not only carried out but their results are collected, shared by the team and used as inputs to improve the quality of the teaching and learning experience.

- *Team meetings*

  Within Barnett's (1994b) framework, team meetings were found to be the most self-enlightening mechanism for course teams overall, although not necessarily reaching their full potential for enhancement purposes. To improve their potential position, course teams and particularly course leaders would need to address the coordination and communication challenges arising from the distribution of staff roles and their location. Issues like the level of formality, frequency and mode of communication can affect team's ability to maintain a consistent and regular strategy for discussing and improving course matters.

- *Annual review*

  The implementation of this procedure showed that the problems found in its enhancement capacity could not be directly caused by the online mode of delivery. The limited capacity for enlightenment for course teams however can be directly linked to their sense of limited control over the purposes and outcomes of the annual reviews. Teams perceived annual reviews as a rather useless process in terms of their effects, and although they consider this to be a good exercise, the purposes are located outside the team. It would need to be brought back in.

- *External examiners*

  In the same way as annual reviews, external examiners were not found to be specially affected by the online mode of the courses. The evidence indicates however that among the procedures analysed, this procedure tended to be the most externally owned and orientated, as well as restricted to the assessment aspects of the courses, limiting its usefulness for teams.

- *Student representatives*

  It was not possible to identify the teams' sense of ownership of this quality assurance mechanism with the limited data available in this enquiry. However, the strong impact on the implementation of student representatives caused by the remote

location of students meant that teams overlooked the relevance of this role as a feedback mechanism.

The challenge for higher education institutions lies in undertaking diverse tasks at different levels. At course level, the research findings indicate course teams would need to:

- *Collect more and higher quality student feedback, taking advantage of the strong relationships established with students and the visibility the online environment offers for monitoring.*

  This study revealed that online courses present particular challenges for collecting a sufficient quantity and quality of data given the remote location of students. For this reason, it seems necessary for course teams to explore new ways of collecting data from students, maintaining a balance between the response rate and the quality of the responses.

- *Re-examine course teams' organisational structure, strengthening the course leader's role and the levels of formalisation of the communication and coordination channels among the team.*

  The results showed the impact that distributed roles and location of teams had in the enhancement function of the quality assurance procedures, and how in this context responsibilities tended to become blurred. Course teams and especially course leaders need to become aware of the organisational challenges that the online mode of delivery involves, in order to eventually regain ownership of these procedures to transform them from compliance-driven events into self-enlightenment processes (Barnett, 1994b; Harvey, 2002).

Accordingly, online course teams would need to manage the application of the quality assurance procedures on their courses as an internal activity oriented towards quality enhancement, in order to realise the promised benefits this mode of delivery offers, namely more flexibility, wider access and ultimately a better quality of learning for students.

Dual-mode higher education institutions have started delivering e-learning courses enthusiastically but usually without an awareness of the implications. At this level, two institutional and interrelated issues need to be carefully and promptly addressed. Institutions would need to:

- *Bring online courses into the institutional mainstream.*

  Online courses in dual-mode higher education institutions present a particular organisational set up that differs from campus-based and the traditional distance learning courses, which are clearly affecting the application of the quality assurance

procedures, limiting their effectiveness as tools for assuring and enhancing quality.

- *Prepare senior management for dealing with the issues associated with the delivery of online courses.* The findings suggest that dual-mode institutions, in particular their senior management, seem not to be fully prepared to deal appropriately with online courses and the implications that this mode of delivery entails for the organisation, relegating online courses into a peripheral, and usually isolated, position within institutions.

In summary, this research has provided key insights into how to tackle a move to more effective assurance and enhancement of quality of online courses in dual-mode higher education institutions. Its value resides not only in the practical evaluation and suggestions formulated from the empirical studies, but also in broadening the discussion and analysis of the application of quality assurance procedures. Barnett's (1994b) framework has been a key contribution to this analysis. However, not all the difficulties encountered in practice could be fully explained by a lack of ownership and control by course teams. In this sense, it was surprising to find the strength with which institutional, managerial and organisational issues affected the enhancement function of these mechanisms. Particularly relevant among the organisational aspects was the influence that the level of formalisation of teams' communications had over the implementation of effective quality assurance procedures, as it affected the distribution of responsibilities and as a result hindered the enhancement function of the mechanisms in place.

The assurance and enhancement of quality in online courses in dual-mode higher education institutions present challenges that have been identified and discussed in this thesis. This contribution is expected to benefit practitioners and encourage researchers interested in the potential role of e-learning to further study the factors affecting enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education contexts.

Reflections on Barnett's framework

In Chapter 7 Barnett's framework (1994b) was used for the analysis of the case studies, though adapted to match the level of the analysis being carried out, that is to course level; and the issues considered in the positioning of the quality assurance procedures within the grid included the organisational factors identified in this research project.

It might be that Barnett's framework could be further reformulated for e-learning contexts

based on the results of this research project, but there are a number of difficult issues that stand in the way of doing this in a straightforward way.

Barnett's starting point for developing his framework was an exploration of the tension between accountability and enhancement that could be observed in the application of quality assurance procedures, and he did this through the identification of the location of control and ownership. For this study this framework provided a lens that allowed us to examine the implementation of the quality assurance procedures in the cases analysed, precisely because this framework is independent of this change of context, as ownership and control are present in both e-learning and face to face environments.

The results of this study have allowed us to identify the main organisational issues affecting the effective implementation of the quality assurance procedures in online courses within dual-mode higher education institutions, that is the position courses have within their institutions and the level of formalisation of the organisation of course teams. To the extent that courses are more isolated within their institutions and their teams less formally organised, then the quality assurance procedures tend to be less effective in terms of their enhancement function.

In relation to Barnett's framework, these two issues identified as affecting the quality assurance procedures might be brought into the framework as two additional elements in the analysis of the effectiveness of these procedures in the particular context of e-learning courses in dual-mode universities. However, the issues of control and ownership expressed in Barnett's framework refer to the quality procedures themselves, whereas the issues of internal position and team organisation identified in this study refer to the courses. So the two sets of issues are referring to different objects in the analysis. There is, indeed, an interesting interaction between these two sets of issues:

- the relatively isolated position of on-line courses within dual mode universities may well increase the sense of control by the course teams as they are not under the same pressure to comply with institutional norms and it may strengthen a more bureaucratic approach to the application of the quality assurance mechanisms
- the informality in leadership, communication and coordination strategies of online course teams within dual mode universities might diminish the teams' sense of ownership and their capacity to implement the quality assurance procedures and to use their results.

Therefore, the issues identified through this study represent distinct objects of analysis, and it is beyond the scope of this project to specify a unified re-formulation of Barnett's model. Future research could explore the development of a specific theoretical framework focused on the particular organisational and institutional issues affecting the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in online courses.

Suggestions for the sector

This section presents brief comments and suggestions for practitioners based on the research findings presented in this thesis. These lessons are aimed to both e-learning course teams and higher education managers interested in improving the strategies and mechanisms to assure and enhance the quality of their courses.

- Course teams need to strengthen the coordination and communication channels among course team members, including academic and support staff, tutors and administrators, firstly through stronger leadership but also with a higher level of formalisation in order to overcome the effects that the distribution of roles and location have on the team's cohesion. This should include the use of formal meetings (both face to face and online) to bring together the informal exchanges and decisions taken in other situations.

- Course leaders need to explicitly distribute responsibilities, and in particular, to clearly allocate the responsibilities for quality assurance, thus facilitating the proper application of the quality assurance procedures, the collection of feedback and its use for the enhancement of the quality of the course.

- Course teams need to collect more and higher quality student feedback, using a range of mechanisms such as student surveys, student-tutor relationship and any other channel available to reduce the effect of students being at a distance; and to focus the course teams' efforts in analysing and acting upon the gathered feedback.

- Course teams need to further explore the possibilities offered by the often close on-line relationship between students and tutors as a conduit for feedback and also as channel for the representation of students' views.

- Course teams need to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the online environment's amplified visibility for monitoring students' participation and

progression, and collection of feedback from students and also, crucially, from tutors.

- Course leaders need to become aware of the organisational challenge that the on-line mode of delivery involves, they need to develop managerial as well as academic leadership to deal with the increased number of administrative tasks.

- Institutions need to promote the integration of online courses into the institution's mainstream activities, by avoiding the implementation of informal or ad hoc processes for e-learning courses, and ensuring that they are fully integrated into the normal quality assurance processes.

Reflections on research methodology

The design of this research project was built upon the hypothesis that the quality assurance procedures in campus-based higher education institutions and applied to their online courses were not capable of capturing the totality of the aspects of the online courses, hence obstructing their capacity for assuring and enhancing quality. Based on this, the strategy for exploring this gap was to examine and compare the accounts provided by, on the one hand, the quality assurance documentation generated by the application of the procedures on a group of online courses, and on the other hand, the interviews carried out with staff and students participating on those courses.

The methodology used in this research project proved to be appropriate to the task on the whole. Three particular elements can be highlighted as relevant contributions: the value of a case study approach; the list of quality aspects developed to code the data; and Barnett's framework for the analysis of the results.

The use of a case study approach proved successful as it permitted the exploration of the specifics of the particular courses, which was necessary as they represented a wide variety of practices. Additionally, the selection of two sources of evidence for the analysis of each case study – namely documents and a range of stakeholders – was very valuable in providing a detailed picture of the context and procedures of each course under study.

The categories created – based on the major theoretical quality documents available – provided a robust list of the quality aspects of a course, through which further work in the area could benefit. In addition, this list of quality aspects and their operational descriptions

used to code the data was demonstrated as being a valuable instrument in providing a detailed and consistent mode of analysing the data gathered.

Barnett's (1994b) work, as an important approach to theorising this area of research, has been a valuable contribution in this project for the understanding of the tension between compliance and enhancement in the application of quality assurance procedures. This framework facilitated the analysis of the data itself and also its interpretation in relation to the position that quality assurance procedures could expect to hold in the future.

The methods selected for the collection of the data impacted on the results obtained. The comparative analysis of both accounts reported that the main differences were related to student participation and support, suggesting that the quality assurance procedures were mainly missing information coming from the students. This gap however could be explained to some extent by the inappropriateness of the quality assurance procedures, or the inadequate recording of their implementation, in addition to the design of the data collection used in this research project. Among the documentation collected there were reports of student's views, such as the results of module evaluations and questionnaires. The amount of data recording student's opinions however was significantly less than the data collected from students through the interviews, which provided a rich and detailed account of student opinions. Consequently, it would be possible to suggest that although there is certainly limited access to, and collection of, student opinions through the quality assurance procedures, they will certainly not be as abundant as the data gathered through the interview process which was carried out.

Limitations

This research project also presents some limitations that need to be considered when analysing the results and trying to generalise them in wider contexts.

Firstly, the representativeness of the case studies in relation to the variety of online courses in dual-mode higher education institutions in England. The case studies selected for this project were all from London and its surrounding areas which matched the qualifying criteria. The limited time and resources available for this research project impeded the selection of courses from a more diverse set of contexts and locations. Although the cases finally included were reasonably representative of the sector – three of the courses belonged to pre-92 institutions and one to a post-92 institution – they are evidently partial,

and potentially this could have influenced the results.

Secondly, limitations were encountered in the gathering of some of the data used in this study. The documentation collected for each case study, although it was enough for the purposes of the analysis, contained some gaps. Some case studies did not have all the documentation available pertaining to the application of their quality assurance procedures (e.g. missing annual reviews or reports on student survey results) which they should have, and which impacted on the results in ways it is not possible to determine. However, it could be argued that the very absence of this documentation is in itself something to be considered. Similarly, the selection of students for interviewing was made by course leaders and that may also have distorted the results.

Thirdly, the differentiation of the factors affecting the enhancement role of the quality assurance procedures was sometimes limited. As was discussed in the literature review, internal quality assurance procedures have already been contested in their enhancement function (Middlehurst, 1997; Biggs, 2001). In the analysis of the effectiveness of some of the quality assurance procedures it was not possible to separate whether the enhancement function was being affected by the way it was being applied or by any of the features of the online environment. In this sense, the design of this research was created with the aim of exploring how the online modality of the course would affect the quality assurance procedures, (which can be observed in the interview guides) leaving out of the exploration and analysis other general problems that these procedures may have had. Consequently, the results of this study may have overlapping factors which are not entirely related to the online modality of the course, and that may be affecting the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures. The presence of this risk was stated whenever it was likely to occur.

Finally, the rather limited analysis that it was possible to carry out from the data regarding external examiners, and the potential impact that the online modality would have had on their role should also be acknowledged. On the one hand this can be explained by the limited contact that course teams generally had with external examiners and thus the incomplete and small amount of data that interviews provided regarding this procedure as it did not represent an issue for staff. On the other hand, the limited coverage given in the interviews to this mechanism during the analysis became apparent. It is, however, reasonable to suggest that a thorough analysis of this procedure in relation to its application to online courses would need to include collecting the views directly from the external examiners themselves – an aspect which was not included in the design of this research

project.

Further work

This research project has provided a deep examination of the application of the quality assurance procedures in online courses in dual-mode higher education institutions, revealing the key issues having an impact on the effectiveness of this implementation. On this journey, several areas have been identified as needing further research, which would help to widen our understanding of both the role of these mechanisms in the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education, and the challenges that e-learning poses to this aim.

In conducting this project it was possible to identify this area of research as under-theorised. This project tried to expand Barnett's (1994b) contribution by applying his framework to the particular context of online courses. It seems necessary however to further develop this approach – or to create new ones – which would be applicable to current institutional contexts, and to support the analysis of the role of the internal quality assurance procedures in higher education institutions.

This project has also highlighted some specific aspects of the organisational and institutional context where the case studies were located which require further study. Issues such as: the isolation of online courses within institutions; the impact of senior management's stance on quality assurance practices; the influence of leadership styles in quality assurance and enhancement in online courses; the tension between accountability and enhancement in staff practices in their relationship with institutional policies; equivalence of courses. Among others, each of these issues can become a research project on its own and could contribute to further develop this research area.

Finally, external examiners and student representation in the context of online learning would benefit from further research that would allow a deeper understanding of their role in assuring and enhancing the quality of courses. The data collected in this research project regarding these two mechanisms proved to be insufficient. Research concerning external examiners requires a closer look at academics who are holding this position to identify the actual implications of their role and reports in the assurance and enhancement of quality of an online course. The limited analysis of student representation carried out in this study revealed the need to approach this mechanism with a wider view of its role, as

representatives are not only limited to provide feedback to staff but more importantly as representing the views of students, never enough in higher education institutions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix One: Exploratory survey form

Quality Assurance of Online Courses in Higher Education Institutions

This survey seeks to identify the extent to which HEIs are currently addressing the issue of Quality Assurance of online courses. This is a new area for some HEIs and the terms used in different institutions differ; this survey uses the following key terms:

- **VLE** (Virtual Learning Environment): refers to the system(s) that provides the 'online' interactions of various kinds, which can take place between learner and tutors, including online learning. Examples of commercial VLEs frequently in use in HEIs are First Class, Blackboard, WebCT, Learning Space. For the purpose of this survey, the term VLE covers also MLEs (Management Learning Systems).

Through a VLE is possible to deliver different modalities of courses (or modules), for example:

(i) Fully online – where all the interaction of students with their tutor/teacher and content is through a VLE
(ii) Mixed mode or blended – face to face teaching + interaction and/or communication through a VLE

This questionnaire includes 7 questions; it should take no more than 8 minutes to answer.

Questionnaire

1. Please identify yourself. Your institution and personal details will only be used to validate your responses.

Name

Institution

Position

2. Please indicate which types of modules and courses your institution offers and at what levels? (Tick as many as apply)

	MODULES			COMPLETE COURSES		
	Under-graduate	Post-graduate	Continuing Professional Development	Under-graduate	Post-graduate	Continuing Professional Development
(i) Fully online	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
(ii) Mixed mode or blended	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Does your institution have <u>specific</u> Quality Assurance PROCEDURES for online and mixed mode delivery courses or modules?

☐ Yes – ☐ No

4. Does your institution have <u>specific</u> Quality Assurance DOCUMENTATION for online and mixed mode delivery courses or modules?

☐ Yes – ☐ No

5. Please indicate which QA procedures and documents apply to online and mixed mode delivery in your institution, specifying whether they are different from the ones for campus-based courses, they supplement them or are the same as for campus-based courses?

Procedures and documents for online/mixed mode delivery	Different from campus based courses	Supplemental to campus based courses	Same as for campus based courses	Currently under development	Don't know
QA policy	O	O	O	O	O
Course/module design	O	O	O	O	O
Course/module approval procedure	O	O	O	O	O
Learning and Teaching Strategy	O	O	O	O	O
Course approval forms	O	O	O	O	O

Student charter	O	O	O	O	O
Student satisfaction surveys	O	O	O	O	O
Assessment procedures	O	O	O	O	O
Library and IT access policy	O	O	O	O	O
Annual course review procedure	O	O	O	O	O
Periodic course review procedure	O	O	O	O	O
Audit trail	O	O	O	O	O
Student complaints procedure	O	O	O	O	O
Others					
	O	O	O	O	O
	O	O	O	O	O
	O	O	O	O	O

6. Please indicate if it would be possible to get a copy of all or some of these documents.

☐ Yes - ☐ No

If yes, please indicate the way it would be possible to collect them and /or the way you prefer to be contacted for this.

☐ Available online. Please indicate the website address

☐ Available electronically. Please send them to **m.jara@ioe.ac.uk**

☐ Hard copy. Please indicate who should I contact to obtain them

Important note: this documentation will only be used for the purposes of this research.

7. Please, add any additional information that might help clarify how your institution approaches the QA issues with respect to online and mixed mode courses.

Thank you very much.

Appendix Two: Exploratory interview guidelines

QA Officer

1. Position and responsibilities in relation to QA procedures.
   - What is your position (role) within your institution, and what are your responsibilities in relation to the quality assurance procedures within it?

2. General information about QA procedures within the institution regarding quality of provision.
   - Which are the main internal QA procedures that are conducted here aimed to assure the quality of the courses that are in offer?

3. Main functions of the QA procedures.
   - What are, in your personal view and practical experience, the main functions or purposes of the QA procedures, from the institutional point of view?

4. Internal attitudes toward QA procedures.
   - How would you describe the attitude that course and module leaders and teams have toward the application QA procedures?
   - Do you think academic staff is aware of the purposes of the QA mechanisms?
   - Which would you describe as the main problems in the application of internal quality assurance procedures?

5. Key procedures for assuring the quality and for enhancing quality.
   - Would you consider that some of the QA mechanisms are more important for assuring and enhancing the quality of courses than others? (Which ones?)
   - Within the range of QA procedures in place, and based on your experience, would you consider that some procedures are better aimed for assuring the quality and other for enhancing course provision, or this distinction is not possible to be made?

6. Efficiency of the current procedures.
   - From your position, do you consider that the procedures in place provide the necessary information about the quality of the courses under revision?
   - What are the weaknesses of the procedures currently in place?
   - What are the strengths of them?
   - Do you think the application of the QA procedures in your institution really help to improve the quality of the courses? How?
   - In the middle of the year (not when a review is going on), what it is usually done when a problem in a course that affects its quality is identified?

7. Concept of quality in a course.
   - In your opinion, which would you say are the key aspects of a course to be reviewed to determine if it is complying with the standards defined by the institution?

8. In your opinion, would you consider that QA procedures are a relevant/good mechanism by which your institution can assure the quality of the courses?

School QA Coordinator

1. Position and responsibilities in relation to QA procedures.
   - What is your position (role) within your institution, and what are your responsibilities in relation to the quality assurance procedures within it?

2. General information about QA procedures within the institution regarding quality of provision.
   - Which are the QA procedures aimed to assure the quality of the courses you have a relation with?

- What is your role in the application of those procedures?

3. Main functions of the QA procedures.
   - What are, in your personal view and practical experience, the main functions or purposes of the QA procedures?

4. Internal attitudes toward QA procedures.
   - How would you describe the attitude that academic staff have toward the application QA procedures?
   - Do you think academic staff is aware of the purposes of the QA mechanisms?
   - Which would you describe as the main problems in the application of the quality assurance procedures within the school?

5. Key procedures for assuring the quality and for enhancing quality.
   - Would you consider that some of the QA mechanisms are more important for assuring and enhancing the quality of courses than others? (Which ones?)
   - Within the range of QA procedures in place, and based on your experience, would you consider that some procedures are better aimed for assuring the quality and other for enhancing course provision, or this distinction is not possible to be made?

6. Efficiency of the current procedures.
   - From your position, do you consider that the procedures in place provide the necessary information about the quality of the courses under revision?
   - What are the weaknesses of the procedures currently in place?
   - What are the strengths of them?
   - Do you think the application of the QA procedures in your institution really help to improve the quality of the courses? How?
   - In the middle of the year (not when a review is going on), what it is usually done when a problem in a course that affects its quality is identified?

7. Concept of quality in a course.
   - In your opinion, which would you say are the key aspects of a course to be reviewed to determine if it is complying with the standards defined by the institution?

8. In your opinion, would you consider that QA procedures are a relevant/good mechanism by which your institution can assure the quality of the courses?

Face-to-Face Course Leader

1. Position and responsibilities in relation to QA procedures.
   - Describe briefly the course you are in charge and its general characteristics.
   - What are your responsibilities as course leader/director?
   - What are your duties in relation to the quality of the course you are in charge?

2. General information about QA procedures within the institution regarding quality of provision.
   - What QA procedures you have to work through as course leader?
   - What do you have to do in the application of those procedures?

3. Main functions of the QA procedures.
   - What are, in your personal view and practical experience, are the main functions or purposes of the QA procedures?

4. Internal attitudes toward QA procedures.
   - How would you describe the attitude that your course team has toward the application of the QA procedures on your course?
   - Do you think academic staff is aware of the purposes of the QA mechanisms?
   - Which would you describe as the main problems in the application of internal quality assurance procedures?

5. Key procedures for assuring the quality and for enhancing quality.
   - Has your course been through an annual review? And through a periodic review?
   - In your opinion, did any of them help you and your team to improve the quality of your course?
   - (If not, why?; if yes, how?)

6. Efficiency of the current procedures.
   - Do you think the application of the QA procedures, in general, help to improve the quality of the courses?
   - Which of the procedures you have to deal with as course leader help better for assuring and/or enhancing the quality of the course?
   - What are the weaknesses of the procedures currently in place?
   - What are the strengths of them? What would you say, based on your experience, are the main benefits of applying the QA procedures?
   - In the middle of the year (not when a review is going on), what do you do (would do) if a problem in your course that affects its quality is identified?

7. Concept of quality in a course.
   - In your opinion, which would you say are the key aspects of your course that show its level of quality?
   - In your experience, how during the process of designing, producing, delivering the course, you and the team take care of maintaining the quality of the course?

8. In your opinion, would you consider that QA procedures are a relevant/good mechanism by which you can assure the quality of your course?

Online Course Leader

1. Position and responsibilities in relation to QA procedures.
   - Describe briefly the course you are in charge and its general characteristics.
   - What are your responsibilities as course leader/director?
   - What are your duties in relation to the quality of the course you are in charge?

2. General information about QA procedures within the institution regarding quality of provision.
   - What QA procedures you have to work through as course leader?
   - What do you have to do in the application of those procedures?

3. Main functions of the QA procedures.
   - What are, in your personal view and practical experience, are the main functions or purposes of the QA procedures?

4. Internal attitudes toward QA procedures.
   - How would you describe the attitude that your course team has toward the application of the QA procedures on your course?
   - Do you think academic staff is aware of the purposes of the QA mechanisms?
   - Which would you describe as the main problems in the application of internal quality assurance procedures?

5. Key procedures for assuring the quality and for enhancing quality.
   - Has your course been through an annual review? And through a periodic review?
   - In your opinion, did any of them help you and your team to improve the quality of your course?
   - (If not, why?; If yes, how?)
   - Does any special procedure was applied considering the mode of the course?

6. Efficiency of the current procedures.
   - Do you think the application of the QA procedures, in general, help to improve the quality of the courses?
   - Which of the procedures you have to deal with as course leader help better for assuring and/or

enhancing the quality of the course?

- What are the weaknesses of the procedures currently in place?
- What are the strengths of them? What would you say, based on your experience, are the main benefits of applying the QA procedures?
- In the middle of the year (not when a review is going on), what do you do (would do) if a problem in your course that affects its quality is identified?

7. Concept of quality in a course.
   - In your opinion, which would you say are the key aspects of your course that show its level of quality?
   - In your experience, how during the process of designing, producing, delivering the course, you and the team take care of maintaining the quality of the course?
8. In your opinion, would you consider that QA procedures are a relevant/good mechanism by which you can assure the quality of your course?

Appendix Three: Theoretical map of quality issues

1. OUTCOMES STANDARDS

1.1. Aims and outcomes

Intended Learning Outcomes	ILOs relationship with external reference points
	ILOs relationship with overall aims of the provider
	Clarity of ILOs statements
Expectations	Expectation of students
	Expectation of staff
	Time commitment of students
	Time commitment of staff
	Adequacy of ways to inform students

1.2. Curriculum

Curriculum	Curriculum relationship with the ILOs
	Curriculum design and structure
	Curriculum content
	Curriculum effectiveness
	Flexibility and student choice
	Inter and multi disciplinarity
	Breadth and depth of study
	Curriculum level – relationship with the award
	Currency
	Clarity of information for students

1.3. Assessment

Assessment	Assessment adequacy for ILOs
	Criteria for assessment
	Assessment procedure security and integrity
	Effectiveness of assessment strategy & instruments
	Security of assessment submission
	Security of assessment results delivery
	Assessment misconduct and its consequences
Student achievement	Level of student achievements
	Student achievements adequacy for the award
	Assessment load
	Assessment time (to prepare)
Formative assessment	Formative assessment (feedback) schedule
	Formative assessment timeliness
	Formative assessment nature and extent
	Formative assessment effectiveness
	Academic support arrangements
	Effectiveness of academic support
External examiners	External examiners role
	External examiners number
	External examiners report
	External examiner's report consideration
	External examiner's report feedback

2. LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

2.1. Teaching and learning

Student capacity	Engagement and participation by students
	Student workload
Staff capacity	Staff workload
	Staff expertise on the delivery method
Teaching methods	Effectiveness of teaching to deliver content and aims
	Teaching methods/activities – variety
	Teaching methods/activities pace & challenge
	Teaching methods/activities breadth & depth

2.2. Student support

Before the start of the course	Recruitment strategy
	Promotional materials
	Admission process
	Induction
	Timeliness of Information for students
During delivery	Administrative support
	Technical support
	Library and IT support
	Career guidance
Students with disabilities	Accessible electronic information
	Accessible materials
	Alternative teaching strategies
	IT support for access
	Communications about equal access

2.3. Learning resources

Staff	Staff experience, expertise & qualifications
	Staff training opportunities
Facilities	Accommodation
	Library stock and access
	Equipment & it facilities and access
	Materials to support learning
	Delivery of course materials
	Reception of materials
Delivery system (VLE)	Reliability of delivery system
	Contingency plans/actions

3. QA PROCEDURES for ENHANCEMENT

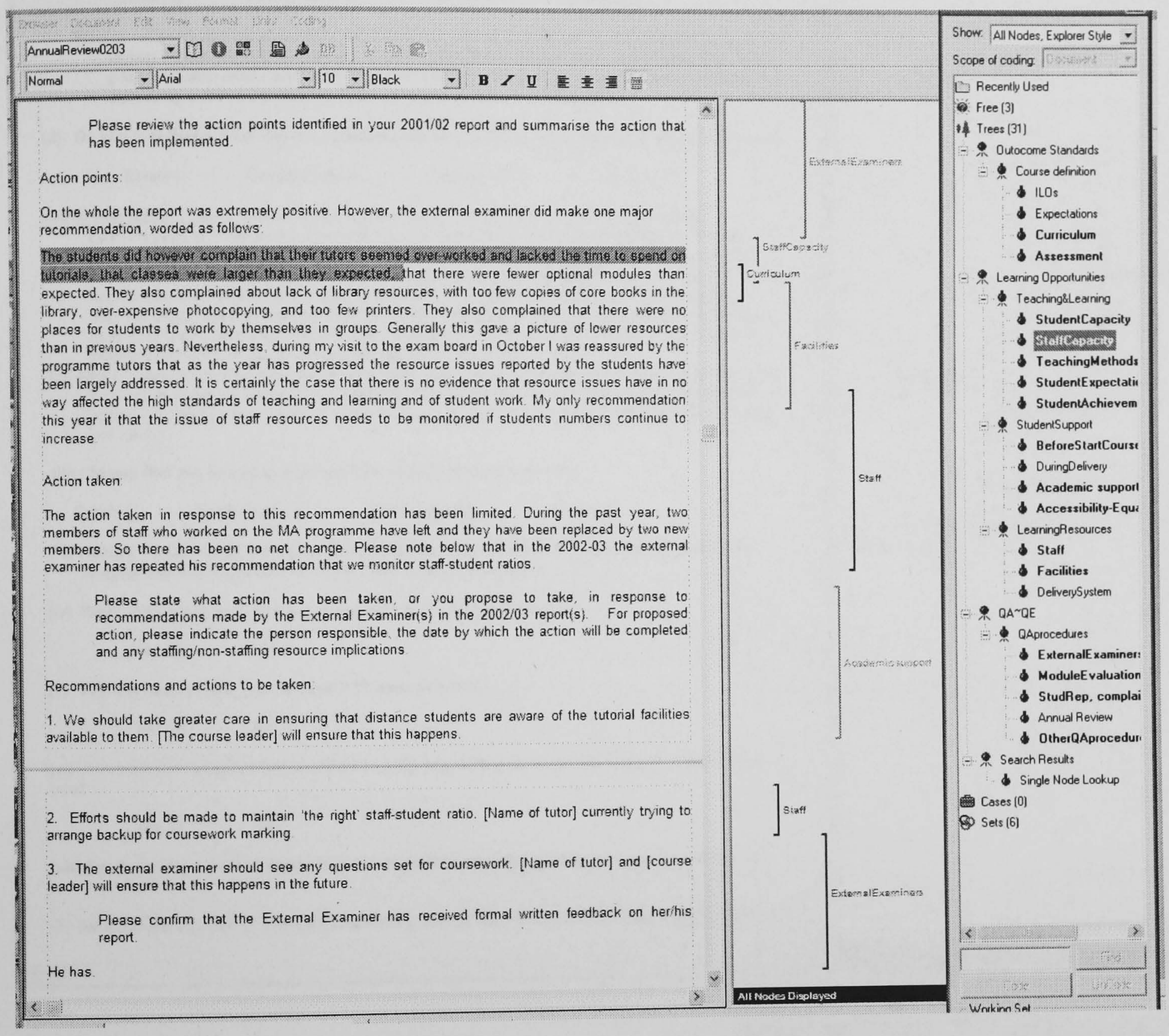
QA procedures	Student feedback
	Staff feedback
	Feedback from former students and employers
	Quality assurance procedures for materials
	Quality assurance procedures for teaching/tutoring
	Modifications to course structure
	Equivalence with parallel course
	Complaints and appeals

Appendix Four: Modified operational definitions of codes

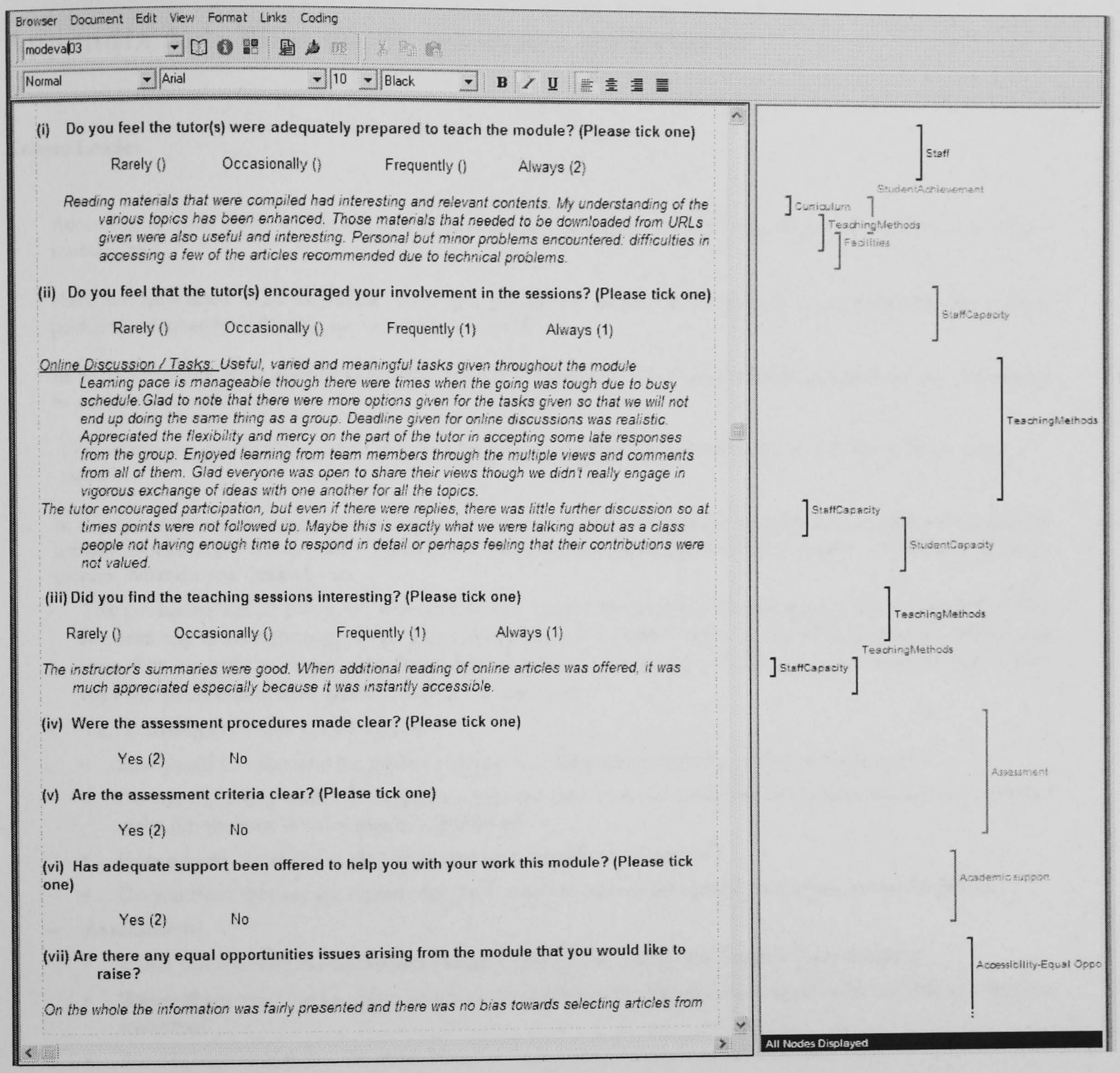
ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES	Refers to issues concerning course administration, like course finances, administrative housekeeping and changes of course leader.
COURSE DEFINITION	Refers to all the explicit and implicit definitions of what the course is and intends to deliver.
Intended learning outcomes	Refers to the aims, intended learning goals and outcomes stated for the course; to their relationship with subject benchmark statements, qualification framework, professional body requirements and any other external reference point; and to their relationship with internal reference points as aims and values of the institution; it also refers to the clarity, validity and relevance of learning outcomes statements.
Expectations	Refers to the expectations regarding performance, participation, time commitment, pedagogic/academic requirements and responsibilities placed upon students and staff; it also refers to the ways in which these expectations are communicated to students, staff and external examiners.
Curriculum	Refers to curriculum content, design, components and structure, and its relationship with learning outcomes; to student options and the flexibility given within the curriculum; to the clarity, currency and its relationship with other subjects/disciplines. It also refers to curriculum changes and updates.
Assessment	Refers to assessment structure, strategies and instruments of the course; to the criteria for assessing students; to the clarity of assessment methods and criteria and to the way they are communicated to students, staff and external examiners; it also refers to the assessment relationship with the stated learning outcomes and curriculum. Refers to submission/examination and assessment process methods and rules; to the methods for informing results; and to assessment misconduct and its consequences.
TEACHING AND LEARNING	Refers to all the aspects related with the teaching and learning experience, by students and staff.
Student capacity	Refers to student workload, participation and engagement in learning activities.
Staff capacity	Refer to staff workload, participation and engagement in teaching activities. Also includes staff teaching allocations and other activities that affect their workload.
Teaching methods	Refers to teaching and learning strategies, methods and learning activities. Includes materials used in teaching and learning activities.
Student achievement	Refers to the level of achievement perceived/achieved by students; level of achievement in relation with the award; level of achievement in relation with assessment load and time to prepare; Refers to the assessment results. Includes also completion and deferrals issues.
Students expectations	Refers to what students expected (not expected) from the course and what they finally got.

STUDENT SUPPORT	Refers to all types of support that students have access to during all the stages of the course delivery.
Before the start of the course	Refers to promotion and recruitment activities and materials; to the processes of admission and induction of students to the course; ways and timeliness of information provided to prospective students and who are in the registration process. Includes intakes and student registration in course/modules. Number of students in relation to decision of the run of modules.
During delivery	Refers to administrative, technical, career guidance and library support for students during course deliver.
Academic support	Refers to formative assessment in the form of formal and informal feedback to students (like tutoring, supervision, draft coursework feedback); planning, organisation and schedule in the provision of formative assessment; timeliness, nature and extent of formative assessment; and student progression monitoring arrangements
Accessibility and equal opportunities issues	Refers to accessibility and equality issues of course materials, teaching strategies, information, support for students or any other aspect of the course.
LEARNING RESOURCES	Refers to all resources that the course counts on and requires to make it a valuable experience.
Staff	Refers to staff experience, expertise and qualifications; and staff training activities.
Facilities	Refers to the facilities for teaching and learning as lecture rooms, library stock and access, IT equipment for staff and students; electronic resources (websites, online resources); delivery and reception processes of course materials.
Delivery system (VLE)	Refers to the delivery system (VLE, conferencing system, how it works, how it's organised), its reliability, access, disruptions, problems, and backup systems.
QA PROCEDURES	Refers to all procedures in place to maintain and enhance the quality and standards, through student, staff, stakeholders and alumni feedback.
External examiners	Refers to external examiners' role and activities; and to external examiner's reports.
Module evaluations	Refers to module evaluation forms, return rates and reports.
Student representation, complaints and appeals	Refers to student representation, complaints and appeals; their procedures and processes.
Annual review	Refers to annual review process and reports.
Other QA procedures	Refers to any quality assurance procedure not covered by the other codes in this general category. Also refers to references and comparisons to other similar internal or external courses.

Appendix Five: Sample of coded text (Nvivo screenshots)



Annual Review, Pilot Study



Module Evaluation, Pilot Study

Appendix Six: Pilot study interview guidelines

Course Leader

1. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?, how has it been running, etc.

2. Have any problems been identified. Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems? Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

3. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What makes it that way? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you taking into consideration that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

4. In the course documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture: What do you think about:

   - The performance of tutors on the course; as a course leader what do you expect from a module tutor? Is there any information given to them about what it is expected from them? What do you do to make sure they are able to respond to those expectations? Is there any way for you as course leader to assure they are performing as expected during the delivery?
   - The learning activities on the course;
     - how would you describe the type of activities that the students are asked to do on the course?
     - Do you think they work out as you have planned them to be on the online environment? (i.e. do the activities make the students do what you have planned?)
     - How do you assure this really happens on each module of the course?
     - Do you think they are appropriate for the students to achieve the learning outcomes you are intending?
   - Assessment;
     - would you consider the assessment strategy of the course appropriate for the course modality?
     - Where there any worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given that staff haven't met the students)?
     - Would you consider that the assessment fits the learning outcomes defined for the course?
   - Module evaluations.
     - Who were receiving the forms back from the students? How were processed the evaluations results?
     - Do you think the evaluations were gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module? According to the documents, the module tutor was reporting its results to the course team? Was the course team informed by any other way of these results?
   - Course team meetings. How were this opportunities effective in dealing with the problems found on the course delivery?
   - Annual review reports. Do you consider the reports are a reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative. According to the documents, every cohort had a representative that was liaising by email with the face to face students to put forward their comments.
     - Do you think this modality of representation has worked out the way expected?
     - Do you think of any way this student representation from the online students could be improved?

5. From the revision of the quality assurance documents I have prepared a brief summary of the findings which I would like you to read and tell me what you think about what was found on them.

Academic staff

1. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?, how has it been running, etc.

2. Have any problems been identified. Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems? Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

3. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What makes it that way? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you taking into consideration that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

4. In the course documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I'd like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture: What do you think about:
   - The performance of tutors on the course; as a tutor on the course,
     - what was expected from you as tutor?
     - How do you know this (was informed to you in any way)? Were you able to monitor if you were able to respond to such expectations? How?
     - Is there any other way you can think this monitoring could be done?
   - The learning activities on the course;
     - how would you describe the type of activities that the students are asked to do on the course?
     - Do you think they worked out as you have planned them to be on the online environment? (i.e. do the activities make the students do what you have planned?)
     - How do you assure this really happened on your module?
     - Do you think they are appropriate for the students to achieve the learning outcomes you are intending?
   - Assessment;
     - would you consider the assessment strategy of the course appropriate for the course modality?
     - Where there any worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given that staff haven't met the students)?
     - Would you consider that the assessment fits the learning outcomes defined for the course?
   - Course team meetings. How were this opportunities effective in dealing with the problems found on the course delivery?
   - Module evaluations.
     - Who were receiving the forms back from the students? How were processed the evaluations results?
     - Do you think the evaluations were gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
     - According to the documents, the module tutor was reporting its results to the course team? Was the course team informed by any other way of these results?

5. From the revision of the quality assurance documents I have prepared a brief summary of the findings which I would like you to read and tell me what you think about what was found on them.

Administrator

1. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it, how has it been running, etc.

2. Have any problems been identified. Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems? Were those problems dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

3. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course you are administrating? What makes it that way? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you taking into consideration that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

4. In the course documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture: What do you think about:
   - Module evaluations.
     - Who were receiving the forms back from the students?
     - How were processed the evaluations results?

- Do you think the evaluations were gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
- According to the documents, the module tutor was reporting its results to the course team? Was the course team informed by any other way of these results?

- Course team meetings. How were this opportunities effective in dealing with the problems found on the course delivery?
- Annual review reports. Did you participate in the elaboration of an annual review report? If yes, do you consider the reports are a reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
- Student representative. According to the documents, every cohort had a representative that was liaising by email with the face to face students to put forward their comments.
  - Do you think this modality of representation has worked out the way expected?
  - Do you think of any way this student representation from the online students could be improved?

5. From the revision of the quality assurance documents I have prepared a brief summary of the findings which I would like you to read and tell me what you think about what was found on them.

Students

1. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it, how has it been running, etc.

2. Have been any problems identified. Were those problems picked up? How, by whom? Were those problems dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

3. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What makes it that way? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you taking into consideration that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

4. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture: What do you think about:
   - The performance of tutors on the course; as an online student, what do (did) you expect from the tutors?
   - The learning activities on the course;
     - how would you describe the type of activities that you were asked to do on the course?
     - Considering the goals of the course, do you think the activities were aiming to achieve those aims? How?
   - Module evaluations. Did you complete the evaluations after finishing modules? Where you putting your actual views on them?
     - Do you think what is put by students on the evaluations is picked up by staff?
   - Student representative. To my knowledge, every cohort had a representative that was liaising by email with the face to face students to put forward their comments to the MA meetings.
     - Did this arrangement work out well for the online students?
     - Did you ever (consider to) put forward your comments about the course through the rep?

5. From the revision of the quality assurance documents I have prepared a brief summary of the findings which I would like you to read and tell me what you think about what was found on them.

Support staff – Developer/designer

1. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it, how it has been running, etc.

2. Have any problems been identified. Were those problems picked up? How, by whom? Were those problems dealt with, ie. was the loop closed?

3. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What makes it that way? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

(*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you taking into consideration that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

4. From the revision of the quality assurance documents I have prepared a brief summary of the findings which I would like you to read and tell me what you think about what was found on them.

Employer(s) / Professional associations?

1. Did the course make any difference on your employee's performance?

2. (If they paid the fees) How was made the selection of the course attended? How do you feel about the course your employee attended? Do you think it was value for money? How have /could you check what you are getting?

Appendix Seven: Pilot study summary of findings on QA documents

Course leader

The comparison of the QA documentation of the MA with the theoretical aspects of what should be covered by QA procedures found that most categories were present and most very well described, but were some aspects not covered and other aspects covered in a very general way.

- Intended learning outcomes are well described and clearly stated on the documents, although there were no references to external reference points or the overall aims of the institution.

- In relation to the expectations that the course has of students and staff, it is interesting to note that all references were related with what the course expects from the students but not from staff.

- Regarding the curriculum, the documents address this aspect extensively but fail in making any reference to its relationship with the intended learning outcomes and its effectiveness for delivering them.

- Accessibility issues for disabled students are not present in any of the documents. Issues like accessible electronic information and materials, alternatives teaching strategies or IT support for access are not mentioned in any of the documents. Although there might be considered the fact that no disabled student was enrolled on the course during the three years that the documents cover, there is no reference on the course handbook on any specific support that disabled students might get (only a general reference who to contact for general disability support).

- It is interesting to note the absence of references to the aspects regarding the delivery system of the course that according to the literature should be present, that is reliability of the system and contingency plans. None of them are mentioned in any of the documents. Although the category is present on the documents, the texts found refer to other issues, like information for students on how is the system organised and how to access it, among others.

- In relation with the quality assurance procedures, the documents refer to a wide range of issues. Nevertheless there are three aspects not mentioned: staff feedback, feedback from former students and employers and quality assurance procedures for materials, which are not part of the strategies contemplated in the course revision. Although it could be argued that staff feedback would be present within the discussions carried out in the programme meetings, they are not formally recorded as such.

- 'Teaching methods' was one of the most specific and frequently aspects mentioned within the documentation that included student feedback, not however on the rest of the documents. An additional interesting element is that when the issue is considered by staff members they do not refer with the same level of specificity with which students mentioned them (although this improved along the years)

Other interesting findings on the documents were:

- Module tutors were reporting back to the MA team meetings the results on module evaluation, which in some cases seemed to have acted as a filter of the issues raised by students.

- Module evaluation forms used were not adapted to the online modality, endangering the understanding students made of the issues asked on them.

- Annual Review form used was not adapted for the online modality, hindering a thorough evaluative review of the course.

- The most frequent issue mentioned on the documents is related with the teaching and learning aspects of the course, especially those related with the teaching methods. On this, students present a very strong position and opinions about activities, tutor performance, what they needed and expected from the course, etc.

- Depending on the type of document, the issues emphasized varied:
    - Module evaluation reports and Annual Review Reports were mainly focused teaching and learning issues.
    - MA team meetings reports focus on student support issues.
    - LTQ meetings reports focused mainly on course definitions and quality assurance procedures that affected all departmental courses.
    - External Examiner's reports focused mainly on course definitions aspects (especially assessment)

- The way and timeliness with which quality issues were addressed by the course team varied considerably. It appears

that some issues were solved in the same term/year they appeared mentioned by students (like the need of an induction period). Others took two years to be considered (like a problem with a book). And others are hidden, not being mentioned at all by any documentation (like the issues relating the performance of module tutors).

Academic staff

The comparison of the QA documentation of the MA with the theoretical aspects of what should be covered by QA procedures found that most categories were present and most very well described, but were some aspects not covered and other aspects covered in a very general way.

- Intended learning outcomes are well described and clearly stated on the documents, although there were no references to external reference points or the overall aims of the institution.

- In relation to the expectations that the course has of students and staff, it is interesting to note that all references were related with what the course expects from the students but not from staff.

- Regarding the curriculum, the documents address this aspect extensively but fail in making any reference to its relationship with the intended learning outcomes and its effectiveness for delivering them.

- Accessibility issues for disabled students are not present in any of the documents. Issues like accessible electronic information and materials, alternatives teaching strategies or IT support for access are not mentioned in any of the documents. Although there might be considered the fact that no disabled student was enrolled on the course during the three years that the documents cover, there is no reference on the course handbook on any specific support that disabled students might get (only a general reference who to contact for general disability support).

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- Depending on the type of document, the issues emphasized varied:
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    - LTQ meetings reports focused mainly on course definitions and quality assurance procedures that affected all departmental courses.
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- The way and timeliness with which quality issues were addressed by the course team varied considerably. It appears that some issues were solved in the same term/year they appeared mentioned by students (like the need of an induction period). Others took two years to be considered (like a problem with a book). And others are hidden, not being mentioned at all by any documentation (like the issues relating the performance of module tutors).

Administrator

The comparison of the QA documentation of the MA with the theoretical aspects of what should be covered by QA procedures found that most categories were present and most very well described, but were some aspects not covered and other aspects covered in a very general way.

- In relation to the expectations that the course has of students and staff, it is interesting to note that all references were related with what the course expects from the students but not from staff.

- Accessibility issues for disabled students are not present in any of the documents. Issues like accessible electronic information and materials, alternatives teaching strategies or IT support for access are not mentioned in any of the documents. Although there might be considered the fact that no disabled student was enrolled on the course during the three years that the documents cover, there is no reference on the course handbook on any specific support that disabled students might get (only a general reference who to contact for general disability support).

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- 'Teaching methods' was one of the most specific and frequently aspects mentioned within the documentation that included student feedback, not however on the rest of the documents. An additional interesting element is that when the issue is considered by staff members they do not refer with the same level of specificity with which students mentioned them (although this improved along the years)

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- Module evaluation forms used were not adapted to the online modality, endangering the understanding students made of the issues asked on them.

- Annual Review form used was not adapted for the online modality, hindering a thorough evaluative review of the course.

- The most frequent issue mentioned on the documents is related with the teaching and learning aspects of the course, especially those related with the teaching methods. On this, students present a very strong position and opinions about activities, tutor performance, what they needed and expected from the course, etc.

- The way and timeliness with which quality issues were addressed by the course team varied considerably. It appears that some issues were solved in the same term/year they appeared mentioned by students (like the need of an induction period). Others took two years to be considered (like a problem with a book). And others are hidden, not being mentioned at all by any documentation (like the issues relating the performance of module tutors).

Support staff

The comparison of the QA documentation of the MA with the theoretical aspects of what should be covered by QA procedures found that most categories were present and most very well described, but were some aspects not covered and other aspects covered in a very general way.

- Accessibility issues for disabled students are not present in any of the documents. Issues like accessible electronic information and materials, alternatives teaching strategies or IT support for access are not mentioned in any of the documents. Although there might be considered the fact that no disabled student was enrolled on the course during the three years that the documents cover, there is no reference on the course handbook on any specific support that disabled students might get (only a general reference who to contact for general disability support).

- It is interesting to note the absence of references to the aspects regarding the delivery system of the course that according to the literature should be present, that is reliability of the system and contingency plans. None of them are mentioned in any of the documents. Although the category is present on the documents, the texts found refer to other issues, like information for students on how is the system organised and how to access it, among others.

Students

The comparison of the QA documentation of the MA with the theoretical aspects of what should be covered by QA procedures found that most categories were present and most very well described, but were some aspects not covered and other aspects covered in a very general way.

- In relation to the expectations that the course has of students and staff, it is interesting to note that all references were related with what the course expects from the students but not from staff.

- Accessibility issues for disabled students are not present in any of the documents. Issues like accessible electronic information and materials, alternatives teaching strategies or IT support for access are not mentioned in any of the documents. Although there might be considered the fact that no disabled student was enrolled on the course during the three years that the documents cover, there is no reference on the course handbook on any specific support that disabled students might get (only a general reference who to contact for general disability support).

- It is interesting to note the absence of references to the aspects regarding the delivery system of the course that according to the literature should be present, that is reliability of the system and contingency plans. None of them are mentioned in any of the documents. Although the category is present on the documents, the texts found refer to other issues, like information for students on how is the system organised and how to access it, among others.

- Module evaluation forms used were not adapted to the online modality, endangering the understanding students made of the issues asked on them.

- The most frequent issue mentioned on the documents is related with the teaching and learning aspects of the course, especially those related with the teaching methods. On this, students present a very strong position and opinions about activities, tutor performance, what they needed and expected from the course, etc.

The way and timeliness with which quality issues were addressed by the course team varied considerably. It appears that some issues were solved in the same term/year they appeared mentioned by students (like the need of an induction period). Others took two years to be considered (like a problem with a book). And others are hidden, not being mentioned at all by any documentation (like the issues relating the performance of module tutors).

Appendix Eight: Revised interview guidelines

Course Leader

1. Since when you are the course leader and what is your participation in the course?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified. Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems? Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (If it not rated top quality) What issues are you taking into consideration that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. How would you compare this course with the (a) face-to-face course?

6. In the course documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture: What do you think about:
   - Assessment strategy of the course – appropriate for the course modality?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given that staff have not met the students)?
   - Module evaluations
     - How are administered, processed, reported.
     - Are they gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – were effective in dealing with the problems found on the course delivery?
   - Annual review reports – are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does it work, how?
   - External examiners –

Plus the areas/topics that will came from the document analysis…

Academic staff

1. What is your participation in the course? Since when?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified. Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems? Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you taking into consideration that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. How would you compare this course with the (a) face-to-face course?

6. In the course documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I'd like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture: What do you think about:
   - Assessment strategy of the course – appropriate for the course modality?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given that staff have not met the students)?
   - Module evaluations
     - How are administered, processed, reported.
     - Are they gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a

module?

- Course team meetings – were effective in dealing with the problems found on the course delivery?
- Annual review reports – are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
- Student representative – does it work, how?
- External examiners –

Plus the areas/topics that will came from the document analysis…

Administrator

1. Could you briefly describe the tasks you do as administrator of this course?

2. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified. Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems? Were those problems dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course you are administrating? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you taking into consideration that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the course documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture: What do you think about:
   - Module evaluations
     - How are administered, processed, reported.
     - Are they gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – were effective in dealing with the problems found on the course delivery?
   - Annual review reports – (if had any role in its writing) are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does it work, how?
   - External examiners –

Plus the areas/topics that will came from the document analysis…

Students

1. At what point of the course are you now? How did you come to know about this course? What made you to choose for it?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. As student, have any problems been identified. Were those problems picked up? How, by whom? Were those problems dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you taking into consideration that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture: What do you think about:
   - Module evaluations
     - Do you complete the evaluations after finishing modules?
     - Where you putting your actual views on them?
     - Are they gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a

module?

- Do you think what is put by students on the evaluations is picked up by staff?

– Student representative

- Did you ever (consider to) put forward your comments about the course through the rep?

Plus the areas/topics that will came from the document analysis…

Support staff – Developer/designer

1. Could you briefly describe the tasks you do/did supporting/developing this course?

2. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified. Were those problems picked up? How, by whom? Were those problems dealt with, ie. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you taking into consideration that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

Plus the areas/topics that will came from the document analysis…

Employer(s) / Professional associations?

1. Did the course make any difference on your employee's performance?

2. (If they paid the fees) How was made the selection of the course attended? How do you feel about the course your employee attended? Do you think it was value for money? How have /could you check what you are getting?

Appendix Nine: Interview guidelines – Case study 1

Course Leader

1. Since when are you the course leader – what is your role in the course right now?
2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?
3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?

   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?

   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?
4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?
5. How would you compare this course with the (a) face-to-face course?
6. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Assessment strategy of the course (assignment + exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
     - 10% coursework is for 'satisfactory participation in online activities' – how is this assessed?
   - Support for students – provided through personal and module tutors + mentors and ebuddies.
     - Do personal tutors scheme works? – expectations in time commitment
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
     - Mentors & ebuddies – what are your expectations? Do they work? Is their feedback gathered?
   - Low levels of participation of students in virtual seminars – how the participation was assessed – what measures were taken to improve the participation?
7. Regarding QA procedures, the course has its own framework –
   - Are the procedures defined in line with the UCL QA policy? And with EISA policy?
     - Does the course apply the same procedures as other UCL courses?
     - Do the course reports back to the UCL QA structure – EISA structure – is there any synergy?
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student feedback is seek through a questionnaire sent by email after each unit/module, that because the low response rates was made compulsory
     - How low was the response rate before? - Have this strategy worked?
     - How are administered, processed, reported.
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – Quality monitoring group (termly) & Peer review meetings (weekly/fortnightly)
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does the IPHC has a stud rep? does it work, how?
   - External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions of the course considering its specific features?

Academic staff

1. What is your participation in the course? Since when?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?
   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?
   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. How would you compare this course with the (a) face-to-face course?

6. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Assessment strategy of the course (assignment + exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
     - 10% coursework is for 'satisfactory participation in online activities' – how is this assessed?
   - Support for students – provided through personal and module tutors + mentors and e-buddies.
     - Do personal tutors scheme works? – expectations in time commitment
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
     - Mentors & ebuddies – what are your expectations? Do they work? Is their feedback gathered?
   - Low levels of participation of students in virtual seminars – how the participation was assessed – what measures were taken to improve the participation?

7. Regarding QA procedures, the course has its own framework –
   - Are the procedures defined in line with the UCL QA policy? And with EISA policy?
     - Does the course apply the same procedures as other UCL courses?
     - Do the course reports back to the UCL QA structure – EISA structure – is there any synergy?
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student feedback is seek through a questionnaire sent by email after each unit/module, that because the low response rates was made compulsory
     - How low was the response rate before? - Have this strategy worked?
     - How are administered, processed, reported.
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – Quality monitoring group (termly) & Peer review meetings (weekly/fortnightly)
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does the IPHC has a stud rep? does it work, how?
   - External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions of the course considering its specific features?

Administrator

1. Could you briefly describe the tasks you do as administrator of this course?

2. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?

   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?

Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:

   - Assessment strategy of the course (assignment + exam) –
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through personal and module tutors + mentors and ebuddies.
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? –
     - Mentors & ebuddies – Is their feedback gathered?
     - Are these roles enough to cover all the needs for support of students?

6. Regarding QA procedures, the course has its own framework –
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student feedback is seek through a questionnaire sent by email after each unit/module, that because the low response rates was made compulsory -
     - How low was the response rate before? - Have this strategy worked?
     - How are administered, processed, reported.
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – Quality monitoring group (termly) & Peer review meetings (weekly/fortnightly)
     - What is your participation in those meetings?
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – (*if had any role in its writing*) are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does the IPHC has a stud rep? does it work, how?
   - External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions of the course considering its specific features?

Students

1. At what point of the course are you now? How did you come to know about this course? What made you to choose for it?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. As student, have any problems been identified. Were those problems picked up? How, by whom? Were those problems dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:

   - Assessment strategy of the course (assignment + exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality?
     - 10% coursework is for 'satisfactory participation in online activities' – how is this assessed?
   - Support for students – provided through personal and module tutors + mentors and ebuddies.
     - Do personal tutors scheme works?
     - Mentors & e-buddies – Do they work?
   - Other issues would like to have you view on:

- Information required/needed to deal with the course requirements – enough, on time?
- Learning materials online
- Low levels of participation of students in virtual seminars
- Workload – time dedicated to virtual seminars
- Induction – lower pace
- Readings access (e-journals) – availability of exam papers – delivery of materials
- Are accessibility issues addressed in the programme?

6. Regarding QA procedures
   - Module evaluations
     - Do you complete the questionnaire after finishing units and modules?
     - Where you putting your actual views on them?
     - Are they gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
     - Do you think that what is put by students on the questionnaires is actually picked up by staff?
   - Student representative
     - Did you ever (consider to) put forward your comments about the course through the rep?
   - Where there any other way you could put forward your opinions about the course?

Support staff – Developer/designer

1. Could you briefly describe the tasks you do/did supporting/developing this course?

2. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?
   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?
   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Assessment strategy of the course (assignment + exam) –
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through personal and module tutors + mentors and e-buddies.
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? –
     - Mentors & e-buddies – Is their feedback gathered?
     - Are these roles enough to cover all the needs for support of students?

6. Regarding QA procedures, the course has its own framework –
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student feedback is seek through a questionnaire sent by email after each unit/module, that because the low response rates was made compulsory -
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – Quality monitoring group (termly) & Peer review meetings (weekly/fortnightly)
     - What is your participation in those meetings?
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – *(if had any role in its writing)* are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?

- Student representative – does the IPHC has a stud rep? does it work, how?
- External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions of the course considering its specific features?

Employer(s) / Professional associations?

1. Did the course make any difference on your employee's performance?

2. (If they paid the fees) How was made the selection of the course attended? How do you feel about the course your employee attended? Do you think it was value for money? How have /could you check what you are getting?

Appendix Ten: Interview guidelines – Case study 2

Course Leader

1. Since when are you the course leader – what is your role in the course right now?
2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?
3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?
   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?
   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?
4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?
5. How would you compare this course with the (a) face-to-face course?
6. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Assessment strategy of the course (wide range: portfolios, webs, essays) – are they appropriate for the course modality?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through personal and module tutors – high presence.
     - Roles clear, not time commitment? – how is work overload managed?
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
     - Monitoring of student progress – addressed by online application – was it solved?
   - Levels of participation of students in online activities – is participation assessed/monitored in any way? – what are the expectations regarding student participation?
   - How are accessibility issues addressed in the programme?
7. Regarding QA procedures –
   - Are the procedures defined in line with the GW QA policy?
     - Does the course apply the same procedures as other GW courses? Do they differ in any way?
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student feedback is seek through a online questionnaire
     - How is the response rate? - is it compulsory?
     - How are administered, processed, reported – when are they reviewed by the team (as team meetings don't seem to pick up issues from them)
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – how this representation works?
   - External examiners – do they provide relevant review/suggestions of the course considering its specific features?
   - Course materials review – how the college wide guidelines are implemented? How the editorial board works?
   - Alumni feedback – is it gathered? How? What is the purpose of gathering this info?

Academic staff

1. What is your participation in the course? Since when?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?
   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?
   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. How would you compare this course with the (a) face-to-face course?

6. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Assessment strategy of the course (wide range: portfolios, webs, essays) – are they appropriate for the course modality?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through personal and module tutors – high presence.
     - Roles clear, no time commitment? – how is work overload managed?
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
     - Monitoring of student progress – addressed by online application – was it solved?
   - Levels of participation of students in online activities – is participation assessed/monitored in any way? – what are the expectations regarding student participation?
   - How are accessibility issues addressed in the programme?

7. Regarding QA procedures,
   - Are the procedures defined in line with the GW QA policy?
     - Does the course apply the same procedures as other GW courses? Do they differ in any way?
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student feedback is seek through a online questionnaire
     - How is the response rate? - is it compulsory?
     - How are administered, processed, reported – when are they reviewed by the team (as team meetings don't seem to pick up issues from them)
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – how this representation works?
   - External examiners – do they provide relevant review/suggestions of the course considering its specific features?
   - Course materials review – how the college wide guidelines are implemented? How the editorial board works?
   - Alumni feedback – is it gathered? How? What is the purpose of gathering this info?

Administrator

1. Could you briefly describe the tasks you do as administrator of this course?

2. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?

Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?
Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Assessment strategy of the course (wide range: portfolios, webs, essays)
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through personal and module tutors – high presence.
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team?
     - Are these roles enough to cover all the needs for support of students?
   - How are accessibility issues addressed in the programme?

6. Regarding QA procedures, the course has its own framework –
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student feedback is seek through a online questionnaire
     - How is the response rate? - is it compulsory?
     - How are administered, processed, reported – when are they reviewed by the team (as team meetings don't seem to pick up issues from them)
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings
     - What is your participation in those meetings?
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – (if had any role in its writing) are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – how this representation works?
   - External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions of the course considering its specific features?
   - Course materials review – how the college wide guidelines are implemented? How the editorial board works?
   - Alumni feedback – is it gathered? How? What is the purpose of gathering this info?

Students

1. At what point of the course are you now? How did you come to know about this course? What made you to choose for it?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. As student, have any problems been identified. Were those problems picked up? How, by whom? Were those problems dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Assessment strategy of the course (wide range: portfolios, webs, essays) – are they appropriate for the course modality?

- Support for students – provided through personal and module tutors
  - Do personal/module tutors scheme works?
  - One stop shop – is it used by students vs directly contacting tutors?
  - Are these roles enough to cover all the needs for support of students?
- Other issues would like to have you view on:
  - Information required/needed to deal with the course requirements – enough, on time?
  - Learning materials online
  - Participation of students in the online environment
  - Workload – time dedicated to online activities
  - Face to face meetings/events – relevance, value for time
  - Are accessibility issues addressed in the programme?

6. Regarding QA procedures
   - Module evaluations
     - Do you complete the questionnaire after finishing the courses?
     - Where you putting your actual views on them?
     - Are they gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
     - Do you think that what is put by students on the questionnaires is actually picked up by staff?
   - Student representative
     - Does the system works?
     - Did you ever put forward your comments about the course through the rep?
   - Where there any other way you could put forward your opinions about the course?

Support staff – Developer/designer

1. Could you briefly describe the tasks you do/did supporting/developing this course?

2. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?
   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?
   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Assessment strategy of the course (wide range: portfolios, webs, essays)
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through personal and module tutors
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? –
     - Are these roles enough to cover all the needs for support of students?
   - How are accessibility issues addressed in the programme?

6. Regarding QA procedures,
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student feedback is seek through a online questionnaire
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings
     - What is your participation in those meetings?

    - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
    - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
- Annual review reports – (if had any role in its writing) are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
- Student representative – how this representation works?
- External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions of the course considering its specific features?
- Course materials review – how the college wide guidelines are implemented? How the editorial board works?

Employer(s) / Professional associations?

1. Did the course make any difference on your employee's performance?

2. (If they paid the fees) How was made the selection of the course attended? How do you feel about the course your employee attended? Do you think it was value for money? How have /could you check what you are getting?

Appendix Eleven: Interview guidelines – Case study 3

Course Leader

1. Since when are you the course leader – what is your role in the course right now?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?

   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems? Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Course curriculum – not described in detail to students. How are students getting this information from?
   - Assessment strategy of the course (exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality? Why the request by students to add other assessed components was rejected? – is this actually a measure of equivalence with the face to face course?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
     - 5% of first module is for 'contribution in online seminar' report – how is this assessed?
   - Support for students – provided through module leader, DL assistants, tutors & personal tutors
     - Tutors role on online seminar + rota for other online spaces - time expectations
     - Do personal tutors scheme works? – why it was installed? Do students differentiate them?
     - How is tutors/DLA/personal tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
   - Low quality of materials – how it come to happen? Why a MM approach to the materials was adopted? (given its difficulties for updating)
   - Low levels of participation of students in online seminars – strategies to encourage participation (personalised emails, monitoring) worked? – was it really a connection between the VLE and the level of participation? – why the team adopted a sympathetic attitude regarding the vle? Are there any activity design issue that could be affecting the participation?

6. Regarding QA procedures –
   - Are the procedures defined in line with the RHUL QA policy? And with EISA policy?
     - Does the course apply the same procedures as other RHUL courses?
     - Do the course reports back to the RHUL QA structure – EISA structure – is there any synergy?
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student questionnaire that was not used – why?
     - Are there formal channels for student feedback? Is there any survey in place?
     - How are administered, processed, reported.
     - Are these channels gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – how often the team meets? Who participates?
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does the course have a stud rep? does it work, how?
   - External examiners – do they provide relevant review/suggestions considering its specific features?

7. Equivalence with face to face course: how do you compare them? Are they of the same standard? Or the same difficulty for students?

Academic staff

1. What is your participation in the course? Since when?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?

   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?

   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Course curriculum – not described in detail to students. How are students getting this information from?
   - Assessment strategy of the course (exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality? Why the request by students to add other assessed components was rejected? – is this actually a measure of equivalence with the face to face course?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
     - 5% of first module is for 'contribution in online seminar' report – how is this assessed?
   - Support for students – provided through module leader, DL assistants, tutors & personal tutors
     - Tutors role on online seminar + rota for other online spaces - time expectations
     - Do personal tutors scheme works? – why it was installed? Do students differentiate them?
     - How is tutors/DLA/personal tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
   - Low quality of materials – how it come to happen? Why a MM approach to the materials was adopted? (given its difficulties for updating)
   - Low levels of participation of students in online seminars – strategies to encourage participation (personalised emails, monitoring) worked? – was it really a connection between the VLE and the level of participation? – why the team adopted a sympathetic attitude regarding the VLE? Are there any activity design issue that could be affecting the participation?

6. Regarding QA procedures –
   - Are the procedures defined in line with the RHUL QA policy? And with EISA policy?
     - Does the course apply the same procedures as other RHUL courses?
     - Do the course reports back to the RHUL QA structure – EISA structure – is there any synergy?
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student questionnaire that was not used – why?
     - Are there formal channels for student feedback? Is there any survey in place?
     - How are administered, processed, reported.
     - Are these channels gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – how often the team meets? Who participates?
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does the course have a stud rep? does it work, how?
   - External examiners – do they provide relevant review/suggestions considering its specific features?

7. Equivalence with face to face course: how do you compare them? Are they of the same standard? Or the same difficulty for students?

Administrator

1. Could you briefly describe the tasks you do as administrator of this course?

2. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?

   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?

   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Assessment strategy of the course (exam)
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through module leader, DL assistants, tutors & personal tutors
     - Tutors role on online seminar + rota for other online spaces -
     - Do personal tutors scheme works? – why it was installed? Do students differentiate them?
     - How is tutors/DLA/personal tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
       - Are these roles enough to cover all the needs for support of students?

6. Regarding QA procedures –
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student questionnaire that was not used – why?
     - Are there formal channels for student feedback? Is there any survey in place?
     - How are administered, processed, reported.
     - Are these channels gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – how often the team meets? Who participates?
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – *(if had any role in its writing)* are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does the IPHC has a stud rep? does it work, how?
   - External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions considering its specific features?

7. Equivalence with face to face course: how do you compare them? Are they of the same standard? Or the same difficulty for students?

Students

1. At what point of the course are you now? How did you come to know about this course? What made you to choose for it?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. As student, have any problems been identified. Were those problems picked up? How, by whom? Were those problems dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

(*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Course curriculum – not described in detail to students. How are students getting this information from?
   - Assessment strategy of the course (exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality? Why the request by students to add other assessed components was rejected? – is this actually a measure of equivalence with the face to face course?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
     - 5% of first module is for 'contribution in online seminar' report – how is this assessed?
   - Support for students – provided through module leader, DL assistants, tutors & personal tutors
     - Tutors role on online seminar + rota for other online spaces – satisfied with their role?
     - Do personal tutors scheme works? – Do students differentiate them?
   - Other issues would like to have you view on:
     - Information required/needed to deal with the course requirements – enough, on time?
     - Learning materials
     - Low levels of participation of students in online seminars
     - Type of learning – (study units + online seminars)
     - Are accessibility issues addressed in the programme?

6. Regarding QA procedures
   - Module evaluations
     - How do you comment on the modules, by what channels?
     - Is there any questionnaire after finishing units and modules? – do you completed them?
     - Are you putting forward your actual views on them?
     - Are they gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
     - Do you think that what is put by students is actually picked up by staff?
   - Student representative
     - Do you have a stud rep? how is selected?
     - Did you ever (consider to) put forward your comments about the course through the rep?
   - Where there any other way you could put forward your opinions about the course?

7. Do you consider the course you are doing as equivalent to the face to face course at RHUL?

Support staff – Developer/designer

1. Could you briefly describe the tasks you do/did supporting/developing this course?
2. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?
3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?

   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?

   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?
4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?
5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Course curriculum – not described in detail to students. How are students getting this information from?

- Assessment strategy of the course (exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality? Why the request by students to add other assessed components was rejected? – is this actually a measure of equivalence with the face to face course?
    - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
- Support for students – provided through module leader, DL assistants, tutors & personal tutors
    - Tutors role on online seminar + rota for other online spaces - time expectations
    - Do personal tutors scheme works? – why it was installed? Do students differentiate them?
- Low quality of materials – how it come to happen? Why a MM approach to the materials was adopted? (given its difficulties for updating)
- Low levels of participation of students in online seminars – strategies to encourage participation (personalised emails, monitoring) worked? – was it really a connection between the VLE and the level of participation? – why the team adopted a sympathetic attitude regarding the vle? Are there any activity design issue that could be affecting the participation?

6. Regarding QA procedures –
    - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student questionnaire that was not used – why?
        - How is the feedback on the course gathered?
    - Course team meetings –
        - What is your participation in those meetings?
        - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
        - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
    - Annual review reports – (if had any role in its writing) are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
    - Student representative – does the course has a stud rep? does it work, how?
    - External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions of the course considering its specific features?
7. Equivalence with face to face course: how do you compare them? Are they of the same standard? Or the same difficulty for students? – how this equivalence was seek in the design of the course?

Employer(s) / Professional associations?

1. Did the course make any difference on your employee's performance?

2. (If they paid the fees) How was made the selection of the course attended? How do you feel about the course your employee attended? Do you think it was value for money? How have /could you check what you are getting?

Appendix Twelve: Interview guidelines – Case study 4

Course Leader

1. Since when are you the course leader – what is your role in the course right now?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course/s? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?
   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems? Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Course curriculum – not described in detail to students. How are students getting this information from?
   - Assessment strategy of the course (exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality?
     - Why the request by students to add other assessed components was not taken forward? (mentioned on Darwin Report) – what is the rate of TMA submissions?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through tutors
     - Tutors role - expectations are not explicit anywhere
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
   - Course materials for Biodiversity course – does it include MM elements?
   - Access to library resources – Athens accounts available but instructions are in the VLE (optional)
   - Staff coverage is mentioned as an issue across the docs. – not clear how it works as courses are not matched with academics.

6. Regarding QA procedures –
   - Are the procedures defined in line with the ICW QA policy? And with EISA policy?
     - Does the course apply the same procedures as other ICW courses?
     - Do the course reports back to the ICW QA structure – EISA structure – is there any synergy?
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student questionnaire had very low response rates
     - How is the response rate? – how much feedback is gathered through the OLE? - Online questionnaire – but access to internet is not required.
     - How are administered, processed, reported –
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – how often the team meets? Who participates?
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does the course has a stud rep? does it work, how? Complaints procedure?
   - External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions considering its specific features?
   - Review of materials – based on what feedback they revise/change materials?

7. Equivalence with face to face course (Integrated system): how do you compare them? Are they of the same standard? Or the same difficulty for students?

Academic staff

1. What is your participation in the course? Since when?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?

   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems? Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Course curriculum – not described in detail to students. How are students getting this information from?
   - Assessment strategy of the course (exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality?
     - Why the request by students to add other assessed components was not taken forward? (mentioned on Darwin Report) – what is the rate of TMA submissions?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through tutors
     - Tutors role - expectations are not explicit anywhere
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
   - Course materials for Biodiversity course – does it include MM elements?
   - Access to library resources – Athens accounts available but instructions are in the VLE (optional)
   - Staff coverage is mentioned as an issue across the docs. – not clear how it works as courses are not matched with academics.

6. Regarding QA procedures –
   - Are the procedures defined in line with the ICW QA policy? And with EISA policy?
     - Does the course apply the same procedures as other ICW courses?
     - Do the course reports back to the ICW QA structure – EISA structure – is there any synergy?
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student questionnaire had very low response rates
     - How is the response rate? – how much feedback is gathered through the OLE? - Online questionnaire – but access to internet is not required.
     - How are administered, processed, reported –
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – how often the team meets? Who participates?
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does the course has a stud rep? does it work, how? Complaints procedure?
   - External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions considering its specific features?
   - Review of materials – based on what feedback they revise/change materials?

7. Equivalence with face to face course (Integrated system): how do you compare them? Are they of the same standard? Or the same difficulty for students?

Administrator

1. Could you briefly describe the tasks you do as administrator of this course?

2. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?

   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?

   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Assessment strategy of the course (exam)
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through tutors
     - Tutors role - expectations are not explicit anywhere
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
     - Is this role enough to cover all the needs for support of students?

6. Regarding QA procedures –
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student questionnaire had very low response rates
     - How is the response rate? – how much feedback is gathered through the OLE? - Online questionnaire – but access to internet is not required.
     - How are administered, processed, reported –
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings – how often the team meets? Who participates?
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – (if had any role in its writing) are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does the IPHC has a stud rep? does it work, how?
   - External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions considering its specific features?
   - Review of materials – based on what feedback they revise/change materials?

7. Equivalence with face to face course (Integrated system): how do you compare them? Are they of the same standard? Or the same difficulty for students?

Students

1. At what point of the course are you now? How did you come to know about this course? What made you to choose for it?

2. According to your own experience, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. As student, have any problems been identified. Were those problems picked up? How, by whom? Were those problems dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate this course? What information are you considering to devise that conclusion?

   (*If it not rated top quality*) What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Course curriculum – not described in detail to students. How are students getting this information from?

- Assessment strategy of the course (exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality? Why the request by students to add other assessed components?
- Support for students – provided through tutors
  - Tutors role - expectations are not explicit anywhere
  - Is this role enough to cover all the needs for support of students?
- Other issues would like to have you view on:
  - Information required/needed to deal with the course requirements – enough, on time?
  - Learning materials
  - Online environment – being not a requisite
  - Type of learning – self study materials
  - Are accessibility issues addressed in the programme?

6. Regarding QA procedures
   - Module evaluations
     - Do you complete the questionnaire after finishing the courses? – on paper / online?
     - Where you putting your actual views on them?
     - Are they gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
     - Do you think that what is put by students on the questionnaires is actually picked up by staff?
   - Student representative
     - Do you have a stud rep? how is selected?
     - Did you ever (consider to) put forward your comments about the course through the rep?
   - Where there any other way you could put forward your opinions about the course?

7. Do you consider the course you are doing as equivalent to the face to face course at ICW?

Support staff – Developer/designer

1. Could you briefly describe the tasks you do/did supporting/developing this course?

2. From your perspective, how is your perception of the course? How do you see it?

3. Have any problems been identified during the years the course has been running?

   Were QA procedures helpful in identifying those problems?

   Were those problems adequately dealt with, i.e. was the loop closed?

4. In terms of quality, how would you rate your course?

   What information are you considering to devise that conclusion? *(If it not rated top quality)* What issues are you considering that contribute to this less than top quality rating?

5. In the documentation reviewed, there were some areas where it was not possible to get a clear picture of what actually happened in practice, and I would like to ask you some questions about those areas in order to complete the picture:
   - Course curriculum – not described in detail to students. How are students getting this information from?
   - Assessment strategy of the course (exam) – is it appropriate for the course modality?
     - Why the request by students to add other assessed components was not taken forward? (mentioned on Darwin Report) – what is the rate of TMA submissions?
     - Worries about problems in plagiarism or impersonation (given staff don't meet the students)?
   - Support for students – provided through tutors
     - Tutors role - expectations are not explicit anywhere
     - How is tutors feedback gathered by the course team? – how their issues are taken forward?
   - Course materials for Biodiversity course – does it include MM elements?
   - Access to library resources – Athens accounts available but instructions are in the VLE (optional)

- Staff coverage is mentioned as an issue across the docs. – not clear how it works as courses are not matched with academics.

6. Regarding QA procedures –
   - Module evaluations – according to docs. formal student questionnaire that was not used – why?
     - Is the questionnaire gathering appropriately the issues you knew students were concerned about during the delivery of a module?
   - Course team meetings –
     - What is your participation in those meetings?
     - Are they effective in dealing with the problems found during the course delivery?
     - How the student (and tutor) feedback is brought in to these meetings?
   - Annual review reports – (if had any role in its writing) are reliable and complete account of what the course was during the year?
   - Student representative – does the course has a stud rep? does it work, how? Complaints procedure?
   - External examiners – do they provide a relevant review/suggestions considering its specific features?

7. Equivalence with face to face course (Integrated system): how do you compare them? Are they of the same standard? Or the same difficulty for students?

Employer(s) / Professional associations?

1. Did the course make any difference on your employee's performance?

2. (If they paid the fees) How was made the selection of the course attended? How do you feel about the course your employee attended? Do you think it was value for money? How have /could you check what you are getting?

Appendix Thirteen: Student survey results

Case Study 1

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Not applicable	
A major reason to choose this course was its flexibility and the possibility of doing it while working.	7	100%								
It took me some time to get used to the online environment.	1	14 %	4	57 %	2	29%				
At the start of the course there was too much information to cope with and that confused me.	1	14 %			6	86%				
The content of the course is of very good quality.	3	43 %	4	57%						
The online course materials are quite confusing and I have sometimes missed parts of the course.			2	29%	4	57%	1	14 %		

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Not applicable	
I consider the feedback I receive from tutors very good.	1	14%	5	71%	1	14%				
Tutors tend to answer my requests for help quickly.	5	71%	2	29%						
The tutors usually get it right when they tell us how much work the module will mean for us. It is very helpful.			5	71%	2	29%				
When I need help on something, I don't like to send public messages on the VLE.			3	43%	3	43%	1	14%		
There are usually delays in the posting of materials on the VLE or sending back feedback.			2	29%	4	57%	1	14%		

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Not applicable	
When seminars are slow they are quite frustrating.	5	71%	2	29%						
The online situation makes it easier for people to disappear without giving any explanation.	5	71%	1	14%					1	14%
The quality of the online seminars depends strongly on how many people participates.	2	29%	4	57%	1	14%				
One of the main barriers for a better participation online is the different time zones.			1	14%	5	71%	1	14%		
I don't know how the 10% mark on participation is actually assessed by the tutors.	1	14%	6	86%						
I think being assessed both by assignments and an unseen written exam is appropriate for this course			5	83%	1	17%				

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Not applicable	
I think we have many ways to give our views on the course, and I don't need anything else.			4	57%	3	43%				
The VLE is used by many students to put up their views and opinions of the course.			1	14%	6	86%				

The evaluation at the end of the modules is too long and that makes it more difficult for me to answer it.			3	43%	3	43%	1	14%		
I complete the module evaluations but do not know what they do with that feedback.			4	57%	2	29%	1	14%		
It would be very difficult to have a student representative, mainly because it would be difficult to collect the views of the students.			3	43%	4	57%				

Case Study 2

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
A major reason to choose this course was its flexibility.	7	70%	3	30%				
The content of the course is of very good quality.	2	20%	8	80%				
The course has been a very good experience, but hard.	2	22%	3	33%	4	45%		
I would like having more face to face meetings to meet other participants.			4	40%	4	40%	2	20%
I don't like reading the materials on the screen. I need them printed out.	2	22%	4	45%	3	33%		
This course is for people that have some familiarity with technology already.	4	40%	4	40%	2	20%		
I don't think the course demands too much work	1	10%	3	30%	4	40%	2	20%

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
I consider the feedback I receive from tutors very good.	4	40%	6	60%				
Tutors tend to answer my requests for help quickly.	8	80%	2	20%				
Tutors are very helpful but the help among participants is not very good.	1	10%	3	30%	6	60%		

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
Some times the collaborative activities do not work well creating friction and lack of communication among participants.	1	10%	6	60%	3	30%		
I don't think is fair that students who do not participate at all in the online activities are passing the course anyway.	2	20%	4	40%	3	30%	1	10%
I think the student workload is too much for the level of the course.			2	20%	8	80%		
The time allocated to complete the online activities is about right.			8	89%	1	11%		
One of the main barriers for a better participation online is the lack of time and motivation.			2	22%	7	78%		
I don't know how the marks are allocated in some of the tasks we have to do.	1	11%	3	33%	5	56%		

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
I complete the module evaluations but I am not totally sure they are really anonymous.			5	50%	5	50%		
I complete the module evaluations but do not know what they do with that feedback.			6	60%	4	40%		
I don't care much about the student representative as I would always contact my tutor directly if want to say something.	1	10%	9	90%				

Case Study 3

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
A major reason to choose this course was its flexibility and the possibility of doing it while working.	35	78%	8	18%	1	2%	1	2%
The VLE is some times slow but on the whole is good.	3	7%	32	71%	9	20%	1	2%
The content of the course is of very good quality.	11	25%	27	63%	5	12%		
Some materials are out dated or flawed but they haven't been big things.	3	7%	33	73%	9	20%		
I prefer to work through the materials in the CD.	11	24%	12	27%	16	36%	6	13%
One main difference between the online and on campus courses is the quality of the communication with tutors: oral communication is better than written.	12	27%	17	39%	14	32%	1	2%

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
I consider the feedback I receive from tutors very good.	11	26%	24	56%	8	18%		
Tutors tend to answer my requests for help quickly.	9	21%	24	56%	10	23%		
Module leaders and tutors give basically the same kind of support.	8	19%	29	67%	6	14%		
When I need help on something, I don't like to send public messages on the VLE.	4	9%	11	25%	25	57%	4	9%

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
I think is good to have a parallel space of conversation outside the control of the university.	19	46%	12	29%	6	15%	4	10%
The quality of the online seminars depends strongly on how many people participates.	24	55%	15	34%	5	11%		
Some of the main barriers for a better participation online are the lack of time and the different time zones.	17	39%	17	39%	8	18%	2	4%
I don't know how the 5% mark in the first seminar is actually assessed by the tutors.	15	34%	14	32%	11	25%	4	9%
I think being assessed by an unseen written exam is appropriate for this course.	11	25%	21	48%	11	25%	1	2%

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
The VLE is used by many students to put up their views and opinions of the course.	3	7%	23	52%	16	36%	2	5%
I would like the university to organise face to face meetings or residency.	18	41%	17	39%	8	18%	1	2%
I think it would be very difficult to have a student representative, mainly because it would be difficult to collect the views of the students.	10	23%	19	43%	15	34%		

Case Study 4

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
A major reason to choose this course was its flexibility.	19	59%	10	31%	3	10%		
The content of the course is of very good quality	8	24%	20	61%	4	12%	1	3%
I think the course content is very thorough but it is too much.	2	6%	13	39%	17	52%	1	3%
Some of the course materials are very out of date.	4	13%	11	36%	13	42%	3	10%

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
I consider the feedback I receive from tutors very good.	7	24%	21	70%	1	3%	1	3%
Tutors tend to answer my requests for help quickly.	3	10 %	22	76%	3	10%	1	3%
I think not having access to Internet is a disadvantage in terms of the support you are able to get.	17	59%	10	34%			2	7%

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
The quality of the online discussions depends strongly on how many people participates.	13	40%	14	44%	5	16%		
One of the main barriers for a better participation online is the lack of time.	11	33%	17	52%	5	15%		
The TMAs are a good idea but it is difficult to find time to do them.	4	14%	11	38%	11	38%	3	10%
I think being assessed by an unseen written exam is appropriate for this course.	4	15%	12	41%	12	41%	1	3%

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
The VLE is used by many students to put up their views and opinions of the course.	2	7%	13	48%	11	41%	1	4%
Now that the course evaluations are online I am completing them.	2	7%	20	69%	6	21%	1	3%
I think it would be very difficult to have a student representative, mainly because it would be difficult to collect the views of the students.	5	17%	11	38%	13	45%		

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